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<td>Tricia Seow</td>
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Reconciling Discourse about Geography and Teaching Geography: The Case of Singapore Pre-Service Teachers

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Reconciling Discourse about Geography and Teaching Geography: The Case of Singapore Pre-Service Teachers

Abstract
This study draws upon a Foucauldian (1971, 1979) notion of discourse to explore how four pre-service geography teachers in Singapore made decisions about what geography is and how to enact their understandings of geography in their classrooms. This analysis of discursive power is particularly relevant to Singapore because of the high level of state control over geography and teacher education. The particular ways in which teacher education is organised in this context also exerts a number of conflicting discursive pressures that pre-service teachers have to reconcile in their subject conceptions and practice. Drawing upon data gathered from concept maps, photo elicitation exercises, interviews and analyses of teachers’ lesson plans and school curricular documents, the study highlights the dominance of discourses at the state and school levels in the Singapore geography education context. However, it also the notes the ways through which participants “resisted” discourse (Butler, 1991, 1993; Moore, 2004), underscoring the importance of pre-service teachers’ professional identities and beliefs about geography education in sustaining their practice through difficult times.

Keywords: subject knowledge and beliefs, geographical education, classroom practice, teacher education, teacher identity
Introduction

“… we have come to understand that effective teaching depends on more than teachers’ subject knowledge and general pedagogical skills or even pedagogical content knowledge. Effective teaching depends significantly on the contexts within which teachers work.” (McLaughlin and Talbert, 1990: 2)

The quote above acknowledges the need to understand the contexts in which teachers make decisions about their practice, and suggests that our understandings of what it means to be a teacher, as well as the relationships between teachers’ knowledge and practice needs to be situated within wider social structures. Moore (2004, pg. 10) argues that teachers’ practice is affected by discourses that frame what it means to be a “good teacher”. Drawing on a Foucauldian analysis (1971, 1979) of discursive power, he highlights that such discourses are ‘essentially produced and sustained by language and knowledge, and controlled and patrolled by ideologies’ (pg. 28). Different types of frames for “good” teaching exist at any one point, each reflecting variable characteristics and dispositions that are deemed desirable in a teacher.

In this paper, I draw upon this notion of discourse to examine the ways in which four pre-service teachers in Singapore endeavour to be “good teachers” at a particularly difficult time in their careers – the Teaching Practice. I outline the discourses that frame both what they know about Geography (their subject conceptions) and its relationship to what they do in their classrooms (their practice), and highlight the inherent pressures and contradictions that pre-service teachers need to satisfactorily reconcile in order to pass Teaching Practice. More importantly I also underscore the resilience of these pre-service teachers’ professional identities and beliefs about geography in the face of discursive pressure during this challenging period in their careers and the implications of this for teacher education.

Understanding the Subject Conception-Practice Link through Discourse

Interest in the relationship between geography teachers’ subject conceptions and practice is evident in the work of researchers (Barratt-Hacking, 1996; Jewitt, 1998; Corney, 2000; Kwan & Chan, 2004; Martin, 2005; Brooks, 2007, 2010; Seow 2014) who have argued that understanding teachers’ knowledge and how it develops with practice over time can provide insights that teacher educators and those concerned with the professional development of teachers can utilise to better inform their programmes.
However there has been little consensus about the relevance of teachers’ subject conceptions to their practice, apart from an agreement that broader contextual issues are implicated in this relationship. Brooks (2007) suggests that teachers are influenced by different types of cultures of influence, including the influence of the subject culture, in their work and that teachers’ practice is situated where these different cultures overlap. This highlights that teachers work within a multiplicity of cultures (or contexts) at any point in time and draw from these to different extents in their practice. However, the research in general does not explain why teachers draw variably from each context, or why teachers in the same context may have different conceptions or classroom practice.

An analysis of discourse – “the parameters within which our perceptions of the social world and our actions within it are framed” (Foucault, 1971, p. 46), could provide an explanatory framework to understand this variability in research findings. Foucault suggests that invisible and diffused forms of power interact to affect each person in highly idiosyncratic ways, and individuals have deeply personal responses to discourse based on their own contexts. Furthermore, research on teacher identity suggests that a teacher’s professional identity is one that is produced through interaction between the teacher and others within the educational context (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000; Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006). Teachers therefore negotiate multiple forms of discursive power in their work to develop a sense of identity through which “to make sense of themselves and their actions… to work out where they ‘stand’ in relation to others; to defend their attitudes and conduct” (MacLure, 1993, pg. 320). Moore (2004) suggests that teachers reconcile the discourses that frame what makes a “good teacher” (Moore, 2004) in particular contexts and points in history. I suggest that understanding the process of negotiating discourse and its link to identity construction would shed light on the nature of the subject conceptions-practice link. To this end, I examine the ways in which four pre-service geography teachers in Singapore reconcile their subject conceptions vis-à-vis other types of discursive power framing what it means to be a “good teacher” during Teaching Practice.

**Conflicting Discourses in the Singapore Geography Education Context**
This section briefly outlines the different types of powerful and conflicting discourses in the Singapore Teaching Practice context\textsuperscript{1} that frame both what pre-service teachers say they know about geography, and their classroom practice as “good teachers”. Goodson (1997, pg. 64) observed that teachers’ knowledge of geography is framed by the “contestation and compromise between different sub-groups and traditions” (Goodson, 1997: 64) within academic geography (Unwin, 1992), as well as within school geography (see edited book by Lambert & Jones, 2013). This can affect the ways in which teachers come to understand geography as a discipline and its larger purpose in education. In Singapore, teachers’ conceptions of geography are largely shaped by two major factors. The Ministry of Education (MOE) unequivocally frames what school geography is through its control of the examination and teaching syllabuses\textsuperscript{2}, teaching guides and school textbooks. There is a tendency to highlight the parts of geography that are deemed most relevant to Singapore’s strategic interests (Wong and Stimpson, 2003; Chang, 2014). In contrast, the Department of Geography at the National University of Singapore (where the research participants undertook their undergraduate studies) prides itself on being highly internationalised and responsive to the practices and paradigms developing in Anglo-American universities (Yeoh et al., 2004), and is less concerned with promoting a geography curriculum that matches up to the school curriculum or to Singapore’s strategic interests. This gap in academic and school geography has also been observed by researchers in the UK (Kent, 2001; Lambert, 2004; Rawding, 2013).

Dominant and conflicting discourses can also be observed regarding teacher practice. The education mantra \textit{Thinking Schools Learning Nation} (TSLN) was first espoused in 1997. Acknowledging the contemporary knowledge-driven and globalised economic environment, it emphasises critical thinking, creativity and national commitment (Ng, 2005). This led to a “veritable hurricane of reform initiatives” (Deng and Gopinathan, 2003, pg. 51) that have the potential to change expectations of what “good teachers” do in their classrooms, particularly because nearly all teachers in

\textsuperscript{1} The Teaching Practice is a 10-week long school attachment, part of the year long Post-Graduate Diploma in Teaching (PGDE) programme, in which all four participants were enrolled.

\textsuperscript{2} This paper refers to the syllabus in place during the time of data collection. At the time of writing, a new geography syllabus has been implemented for the upper secondary level in 2013 and for the lower secondary level in 2014. This change does not affect the main arguments in this paper.
Singapore are direct employees of the MOE and are subject to MOE’s teacher assessment policies. However, Hogan and Gopinathan (2008, pg. 370) point to the “very tight coupling between the high stakes summative assessment system and classroom instruction” in Singapore schools. Other studies have also shown that teachers in Singapore are well-aware of the value of changing their pedagogy to allow for critical thinking and creativity in their classrooms, but are reluctant to do so because they are afraid to compromise their students’ examination results (Retna & Ng, 2006). This is further supported by the fact that teachers are also ranked annually (within and across schools in the same “cluster”), with higher rankings commensurate with higher performance bonus pay outs (Liew, 2008).

A similar tension in policy implementation can also be observed within teacher education. During Teaching Practice, pre-service teachers are observed by both school-based mentors known as Co-operating Teachers (CTs) and a supervisor from the National Institute of Education (NIE), which is solely responsible for the preparation of pre-service teachers. Sharpe et al. (1994) noted that CTs tend to focus on classroom management, providing guidance on procuring teaching resources within the school and planning lessons within their own schemes of work. This contrasts with the supervisors who are more concerned overall with analysing pedagogy in the lesson and linking these to institutional knowledge at the NIE. It is important to highlight that pre-service teachers in Singapore are situated in a particularly high-stakes context. As paid employees of the MOE, punitive liquidated damages would have to be paid back if they fail to qualify as teachers. Pre-service teachers therefore need to clearly demonstrate the qualities associated with “good teachers” during Teaching Practice, while being simultaneously assessed by mentors who may emphasise different aspects of teaching.

In Foucault’s framing of power, however, no one individual or group ever fully has control of it. The notion of the “good teacher” should therefore not be viewed as imposed unilaterally by one dominant actor (e.g., the state) but rather should be seen as a “bottom-up capillary process of social relations” (Ball, 1993, pg. 112). The focus of the paper remains squarely on the individual pre-service teacher and how he/she makes sense of geography and the teaching of geography within conflicting forms of discursive power operating in the Singapore teacher education context. This is reflected in the research methodology outlined in the next section.
Methodology and Analysis

The data reported here was collected as part of a larger PhD study on pre-service teachers’ subject conceptions and practice. The four research participants were selected because of their contrasting experiences of school and academic geography, and work experience, which may have affected their views of geography and its purpose within education. Table 1 provides this background data on the participants. The participants were similar in terms of age (in their early to mid-twenties), educational qualifications (BA from the National University of Singapore), and the type of school they were doing Teaching Practice in (state schools with students of average to below average academic abilities).

Table 1. Participant Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>School Geography Experience</th>
<th>Academic Geography Experience</th>
<th>Work Experience</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Studied Geography at GCE “O” &amp; “A” levels (6 years)</td>
<td>Majored in Geography, plus an additional Honours year</td>
<td>Media relations for the Singapore Armed Forces, Editor for a geography textbook publisher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baozhu</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Studied Geography at GCE “O” levels (4 years)</td>
<td>Majored in Geography</td>
<td>Cabin crew with Emirates Airlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Studied Geography at GCE “O” &amp; “A” levels (6 years)</td>
<td>Majored in Geography, plus an additional Honours year</td>
<td>Part-time trainer for an education consultancy company while at university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Studied Geography in secondary school (2 years)</td>
<td>Majored in Geography</td>
<td>Part-time IT sales and support staff while at university; Owned his own manpower recruitment agency</td>
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Data collection in this study focused on two key areas: probing pre-service teachers’ conceptions of geography, following the definitions provided by Grossman et al.

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3 Only the top students in the graduating cohort are selected to do an additional year in their subject major. Within Geography, it is in the Honours year that students formally study the philosophical traditions and paradigm shifts in the discipline.
al. (1989: 27-32)\(^4\), and understanding the linkages between conceptions and practice through an analysis of discursive power. Table 2 summarises the data collection methods employed (for more information on the data collection methods and references, refer to Seow, 2014).

Table 2. Data Collection Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Timings</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>• At the start of the NIE course.</td>
<td>• To examine subject conceptions and the discursive influences on conceptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Just after Teaching Practice.</td>
<td>• To examine classroom practice, links between conceptions and practice, discursive influences on practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• At the end of the NIE course.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept mapping of Geography</td>
<td>• At the start of the NIE course.</td>
<td>• To examine subject conceptions and the discursive influences on conceptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review concept map</td>
<td>• At each interview.</td>
<td>• To examine the links between subject conceptions and practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorting and ranking geographical photos</td>
<td>• At the start of the NIE course.</td>
<td>• To examine subject conceptions and the discursive influences on conceptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultures of influence maps</td>
<td>• After Teaching Practice</td>
<td>• To examine classroom practice, links between conceptions and practice, discursive influences on practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of curricular</td>
<td>• Collection of files at interview after</td>
<td>• To examine classroom practice, links between conceptions and practice, discursive influences on practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>documents (lesson plans,</td>
<td>teaching practice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schemes of work, written</td>
<td>• Analysis of documents shared with</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feedback from mentors,</td>
<td>participants for comments at interview at</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>written reflections)</td>
<td>the end of NIE course.</td>
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The analysis was data-driven (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the analysis process, the raw data, including researcher notes as well as transcriptions of the interviews, were classified and coded according to the research questions. This coding

\(^4\) This definition of subject knowledge includes both the cognitive (content knowledge for teaching, substantive and syntactic structures) and affective dimensions (beliefs about the subject).
system evolved with the data. Individual case reports were also written up for participants to validate, before cross-case conclusions and generalisations were developed.

Findings

Reconciling Discourse about Geography: the Influence of Teacher Identity

Unsurprisingly, the study pointed to dominance of the state in defining how participants chose to define geography, with all the pre-service teachers taking reference from the syllabuses and textbooks in terms of both geographical content and structure. However, the extent to which they limited themselves to the school syllabus and examinable content in their discussions varied. The data suggested that the participants reconciled discourse through the professional identities they had adopted during the teacher education programme. The data revealed three types of identities:

- **Geography teacher** – someone who identifies as a geographer but who consciously draws on school geography discourses in discussions of what geography is, and what a “good teacher” of geography does (Anna, Baozhu).

- **Geographer** – someone who identifies firstly as a geographer and who draws mainly on academic geography discourses in discussions of what geography is, and what a “good teacher” of geography does (Daniel).

- **Teacher who happens to teach geography** – someone who identifies as a teacher and for whom a geographic identity is unimportant to his/her work as a “good teacher” (Eddie).

For instance, Anna’s concept map (Figure 1) was an organised description of the content knowledge of geography for teaching premised on the study of the relationships between people and their environment.

“Geography, to me, is about, I suppose the relationship about people and… and space, you know, a man’s environment or something like that? Erm, and I think it has to be a two-way thing… How the environment affects man, and how man has the ability to change or affect the environment.”
As a geography teacher, Anna gave prominence to the school syllabuses which explicitly framed the study of geography around physical-human relationships. This conception of geography was also augmented by Anna’s work experience as a geography textbook editor (see Table 1). For instance she observed that “I am a little bit more confident… simply because I did the textbook before, I kind of know the syllabus and the content.” The data further suggested that Anna was consciously selecting only from the school geography syllabuses during the concept mapping and photo elicitation exercises. For instance, she had a coherent and detailed knowledge of geographical paradigms, and could discuss other types of geographical content not in the syllabuses, but chose to exclude these from her discussions of geography until prompted to do so. She explained that this was because

“…what I have been trained in and the kind of geography that I learned in uni and all, really does not get incorporated… reason why I drew this [concept map] was because I thought going into school, this is the kind of geography that is expected of us to be taught to the students.”

Baozhu, like Anna, identified as a geography teacher. In the photo elicitation exercise, she ranked pictures that were more cultural or political in content as least geographical because while they were “still geographical, as geography teachers right, we need to
present the bigger picture to the children”. This bigger picture focused on “how humans affect the environment and how the environment affects humans” – a clear reference to the geography syllabuses. In addition, when rationalising whether a photograph was geographical or not, Baozhu made decisions based on whether she could “fit it into a chapter in the textbook, then it’s geographical”. However, it was evident that Baozhu’s understanding of geography went beyond the school syllabuses and textbooks. She drew upon her academic experiences of geography when she expressed that having a “geographical eye” meant that “you ask yourself questions about why something is here and why did it end up here… I thought that geography was more of a perspective than a discipline… more about how you see things.”

Daniel articulated a much broader conception of geography than Anna and Baozhu, situating the school syllabuses as only part of his overall conceptions (Figure 2). This was reinforced in the interviews when he stated that,

“Geography is first the environment in the sense that the physical processes, the natural phenomenon that people study, so that on one hand like Earth Science… The other aspect of geography is… then the role of the human in adapting, in moving around this environment, what do they do, how do they deal with limitations... So I put these two together in a third category, and that one was human interaction with the natural environment. Human adaptation… I think this is the part that is in the syllabus.”

The similarities in Daniel and Anna’s past experiences of geography are obvious (Table 1), and in the interviews both participants were equally coherent and insightful in their discussions of geographical content, organisational structures and paradigms. The main difference between them appeared to be how they chose to express what geography was and its link to the professional identities they had adopted - Anna had reconciled the discourses within geography through her identity as a geography teacher. She therefore stressed what was important to the school syllabuses when discussing her conceptions of geography. In contrast, Daniel, who identified as a geographer, chose to discuss the school syllabuses as only a sub-set of his conceptions.

Figure 2. Daniel’s Concept Map
Eddie appeared to identify as a teacher who also happened to teach geography and felt it was irrelevant to engage with debates about the relationships between school and academic geography because “my subject conceptions is according to [how] the school wants it to be taught, according to scheme of work content… mainly I am the person who delivers these things”. Eddie believed he could “also teach other subjects because you can always build up content, you can read up”. As a teacher it was more important to know how to maintain good classroom management because “you know so much geography also no use if you cannot control the student. They won’t listen to all your talking”.

**The Conceptions-Practice Link: Reconciling the Influence of Mentors**

An emphasis on practical classroom knowledge (Deng and Gopinathan, 2003), as well as a financially high-stakes context, implies that participants were in highly asymmetrical power relationships with their mentors during the Teacher Practice. Unsurprisingly, the data suggested that participants drew on their conceptions of geography in their practice only to the extent that their mentors supported these conceptions. For instance, Anna pointed to an alignment between her own conceptions of geography and how a good geography teacher practiced with her CT. This was reflected in her cultures of influence map (Figure 3) where her subject conceptions and the school context were both influential on her practice.
In contrast, an analysis of Daniel’s lesson plans suggested that he drew minimally on his subject conceptions during Teaching Practice. He explained that this was because his CTs had “fixed ideas about how a lesson should be carried out... I was given express instructions also to just follow the textbook, quote unquote, just follow the textbook”. This therefore limited his ability to “draw upon a wealth of different disciplines within geography” and present “higher-level [geographical] links” to his students. Daniel referred explicitly to the discourses in teacher education that prevented him from drawing on his conceptions of geography in his practice.

“Perhaps I might have persisted, but... where people are observing and critiquing... I penalised myself. Rather than go down that route and be in danger of failing, it was more practical for me to revert to more conventional options.”

The relatively unimportant influence of his subject conceptions to his practice was also evident in Daniel’s cultures of influence map (Figure 4).
What was surprising, however, was that Daniel insisted that the school context was also unimportant, despite the obvious influence of his CTs on his practice. In the interview, Daniel took pains to distance himself from the school context and emphasised his personal epistemic beliefs about the constructed and changing nature of geography as a discipline. He also referred to the TSLN initiatives in the education context which emphasised constructivist classroom methods, commenting that the teachers in his school were opposed to the TSLN initiatives, but that “it’s a world out there for me. Teachers that are disgruntled, this is divorced from me”.

Daniel was not alone in his response to the intense discursive pressure to conform in the school context by drawing on other types of discourses that were more aligned to his identity as a geographer. Both Anna and Baozhu similarly made references to other types of discourses when confronted with pressure to practice in ways that were at odds with their adopted professional identities. For instance, Anna reported that her NIE supervisor was a stickler for classroom management – “my sup’s stand is that everyone must be seated, bags to the side, sitting up straight, looking to the front, if you want to talk, you raise your hands”. Due to the asymmetrical power relationship between them, Anna felt obliged to comply and procured “a whistle and everything for like when the sup comes. Of course before that I’d train the class with the whistle thing... There was, to be honest, there was definitely a change in the, like how I taught”. However, Anna resisted this practice at other times, drawing on her CT for support.

“My CT was very realistic in telling me that when your sup comes down, it’s a lights, camera, action kind of thing. So you have to doll it up because it’s your grade… If you want to do it for every lesson, you will die.”
Baozhu reported a similar experience to Anna in that there was a difference in the assessment of what constituted good geography teaching between her NIE supervisor and herself.

“My supervisor is quite an old lady… and she’s retired. So I think her concept of what a lesson should be is different from mine. She would want to see more concepts and content to be put through to the students. Whereas for me right, for me I think it’s more important to get the students interested in the lesson, in the topic.”

Like the others, Baozhu acknowledged the asymmetrical power relationship with her supervisor, stating that her supervisor “had the upper hand. When she came, I just did what she wanted. I stood at the front and delivered the, just the content.” At other times, however, Baozhu chose to draw upon her school’s policy of “restorative discipline”, which was in tandem with the school’s focus on counselling and its motto of “healthy and happy students” to support her preference for lessons that interested her students and allowed them leeway to reflect and explore geographical content.

**Discussion**

Brooks (2007, 2016) suggested that teachers’ subject conceptions are an important source of motivation in their work, but notes that teachers are not always able to draw upon them. This study supports Brooks’ assertion and further interrogates why and how discursive power works to constrain and enable teachers to draw upon these conceptions in their practice. Moore (2004) pointed out that discourse is especially powerful because it does not appear constructed. Any opposition to the norms dictated by discourse is therefore pathologised. This implies that a discursive framing of the “good teacher” is potentially limiting since its imposed parameters and frameworks leave little room for alternative discussions of teachers’ work (Atkinson, 2008). For instance, Daniel was unable to draw upon his conceptions during Teaching Practice which was frustrating to him. To a smaller extent, both Anna and Baozhu felt constrained by their NIE supervisors in their practice as well. At the most superficial level of analysis, this was because discursive power within the teacher education context privileged the practical classroom knowledge of the more experienced mentors (Deng and Gopinathan, 2003). These three teachers needed to accommodate their mentors in terms of how they drew upon their own beliefs and understandings of geography in their practice, despite their own misgivings. (This in contrast to Eddie whose conceptions of geography appeared to be formed entirely
by his mentors, and whom did not report any conflict between his conceptions and practice.)

An implication of this finding is that research on identifying and developing teachers’ subject knowledge and teachers’ pedagogical knowledge (Corney, 2000; Kwan & Chan, 2004; Martin, 2005; Brooks, 2007, 2010; Seow, 2014) in order to support and inform geography teacher education programmes is insufficient. Both research and teacher education policy should address the issue of discursive power and engage both university and school-based mentors in an examination of their own conceptions and practice, and their implications for how they mentor pre-service teachers. Researchers such as Hoyle (1986), Ball (1987), Blasé (1991) and Blasé and Anderson (1995) have clearly illustrated how diversely situated individuals and groups in the school context leverage on different forms of power to influence one another. However, this perspective has not been systematically applied to teacher education mentoring programmes and policies.

A second finding relates to the debate in the literature about how teachers reconcile the split between academic and school geography (Barratt-Hacking, 1996; Rynne and Lamb, 1997; Jewitt, 1998; Corney, 2000). The study noted that respondents’ responses to discourse were mediated by the professional identities that they had adopted. Anna and Baozhu purposefully selected from their geographical knowledge only the aspects that were found in the school curriculum because they had positioned themselves as geography teachers. Daniel decided to place the school geography content within his larger conceptions of geography, rather than be limited by them, because of his professional identity as a geographer. Eddie privileged classroom management skills rather than subject knowledge because of his identity as a teacher. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) observed that research has paid attention to the importance of teacher identity development (Britzman, 2003; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Hoban, 2007) but that “overt attention to these shifts within teacher education programmes has not always been evident” (pg. 184). At the NIE, much of the coursework is premised on engaging with geography’s core concepts and disciplinary perspectives. This is aligned with larger concerns about developing critical thinkers with sound subject expertise within both Singapore (TSLN) and in the international geography fraternity (A Different View, 2009; Road Map for 21st Century Geography Education, 2013). However, the data in Eddie’s case indicates that he found the coursework irrelevant because of his perception that the only geographical knowledge required of him was the content in the
school syllabuses. Eddie’s belief was further reinforced by the Teaching Practice. This implies that if a goal of teacher education is to encourage more engagement with disciplinary perspectives, teacher educators and policy makers have to focus on teachers’ professional identities. It suggests the importance of encouraging pre-service teachers to develop a geographic identity, and not just that of a teacher.

Moore (2004, pg. 31) alluded to the transgressive potential of discourse when he observed that

“…discourses, for all their objective power and dominance, and for all their capacity to infiltrate the consciousness, are neither immutable nor impenetrable…both their constantly evolving nature and our ability to at least be aware of them inevitably render them contestable and challengeable.”

He further suggested that teachers balance their personal pedagogical orientations against discursive frameworks by “shifting their ground constantly and pragmatically in relation to what is possible” (2004, pg. 33). This focus on teachers’ agency relative to discursive structures has been applied to teachers’ practice (Moore, 2004; Ball, 2010; Ball et al., 2011), but has not been applied to teachers’ conceptions and its links to practice. My research suggests that teachers have agency to align their subject conceptions and their practice by drawing upon the discourses that best support their own professional identities and beliefs.

The ability of participants to be conscious of and actively resist discursive pressure is aligned to calls by researchers who emphasise the importance of engaging with teacher identity in both research (Zembylas, 2003; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011) and in teacher education (Clarke, 2009; Mockler, 2011). Clarke (2009, pg. 187) argued that “engaging in ‘identity work’ is indispensable for teachers if they wish to exercise professional agency, and thereby maximise their potential for development and growth”. Zembylas (2003) suggested that getting teachers to reflect on their identities relative to discourse “avoids the problematics of normalising identity and allows teachers a broader range of strategies to negotiate with others and with themselves” (pg. 108). This is particularly important given the increasing levels of state control over teachers’ work (Ball, 1990, 1993; Bartlett, 2000; Halse et al., 2004; Hall and Noyes, 2009), and the tendency to emphasise skill-focused competence in teacher education (Clarke, 2009).

Conclusion
This study focuses on pre-service teachers in a year-long teacher education programme, during which participants taught for ten weeks. This limits the generalisations that can be drawn about the linkages between their subject conceptions and practice. However, this research has nevertheless contributed to subject conceptions research in important ways. It has highlighted the need to approach pre-service teachers’ subject conceptions and practice explicitly as responses to discursive contexts. This is also useful for studies on beginning through to expert teachers, because policies designed to support teachers’ professional development should take into account the changing nature of discourse and the impact of power relationships on teachers’ knowledge and practice at various points in their career.

The paper has also illuminated the role of pre-service teachers’ professional identities in informing their subject conceptions and practice. This identity was an important means through which they resisted discursive power in their work and pursued classroom practice that they found more meaningful. This finding highlights the importance of addressing pre-service teacher identities in initial teacher education policy and course structures.

…a teacher education programme seems to be the ideal starting point for instilling not only an awareness of the need to develop an identity, but a strong sense of the ongoing shifts that will occur in that identity… We must try to incorporate what we know about the contexts and communities and their influence on the shaping of teacher identities into our teacher education programmes to prepare new teachers for the challenges of developing strong professional identities in positive ways. (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011, p. 186)

References


