Context and Power: The Subject Conceptions and Practice of Pre-service Geography Teachers in Singapore

Tricia Seow

Introduction
Teachers’ subject conceptions have been the focus of a large body of educational research (see Wideen et al., 1998; Calderhead, 1996 for reviews of the literature). Within Geography education, researchers have also studied the subject conceptions of novice Geography teachers (Barrett-Hacking, 1996; Leat, 1996; Walford, 1996; Corney, 2000; Martin, 2005) and their more experienced counterparts (Jewitt, 1998; Brooks, 2007). These subject conceptions have important implications for teachers’ practice. For example, Jewitt (1998), Catling (2004), Kwan and Chan (2004) have found strong correlations between teachers’ subject conceptions and their practice. However, while subject conceptions are important, research has also demonstrated that the influences on the formation of teachers’ subject conceptions are complex and varied. For example, Jewitt (1998), Martin (2005) and Brooks (2007) have found that past experiences, higher education, government policies and school cultures can all affect teachers’ subject conceptions to varying extents; what is central very much depends on the teacher in question. In addition, whatever their conceptions, teachers’ practice may not always match up to them (Barrett-Hacking, 1996; Martin, 2005; Brooks, 2007), as teachers may ‘suspend’ their conceptions to deal with the exigencies of coping with day-to-day teaching in the school context (Barrett-Hacking, 1996). This therefore suggests that when looking at teachers’ subject conceptions, there is a need to understand what the formative influences on these conceptions are, and to identify which are the more significant ones. Furthermore, it is clear that teachers do not carry out their practice in a vacuum. Research needs to look at the contexts in which teachers operate, which constrain or enable teachers to carry out their practice in specific ways.

My research is concerned with seeking a better understanding of the context in which teachers are situated, and how this context affects their practice. The point that this context extends beyond the classroom or school, and also includes broader influences like national educational policies and the cut and thrust of a subject’s own developmental and social context cannot be over-emphasised. Additionally, these contexts are embedded within power relationships. The philosopher/historian Michel Foucault argued that the educational system is a ‘political means of maintaining and modifying the appropriateness of discourses with the knowledge and the power that they bring with them’ (Foucault, 1971:46). By ‘discourse’ Foucault was referring to the ‘parameters within which our perceptions of the social world and our actions within it are framed’. These parameters are ‘essentially produced and sustained by language and knowledge, and controlled and patrolled by ideologies’ (Moore, 2004:28). Drawing on the idea that social contexts are infused with power relationships that circumscribe and condition our thoughts and actions, I am interested in exploring the discourses that shape the role of a teacher, teachers’ conceptions of Geography and their subsequent practice. The analytical framework can be seen in Figure 1 below.
At the heart of the framework is the pre-service Geography teacher. Influences prior to enrollment in the teacher education programme like the school and academic context in which he/she studied, as well as personal factors, help to shape the pre-service teacher’s conceptions of Geography, and continue to do so even as they enter the teaching service. The nature of the influence and its subsequent impact on classroom practice is as yet unclear (both in my research and in the literature in general), hence the tentative arrows in the diagram. Similarly, when the pre-service teacher goes into a school, he/she is also affected by various contexts and the power structures within these like the national education, school and subject-level context.

The Singapore case
My research focuses on the Singapore context, where hardly any work has been done on subject conceptions, and certainly none in Geography. There are certain features of the Singapore context that I would like to specially point out because they are important to my study. Firstly, the Singapore education system is highly centralized and uniform compared with the UK, for example. The majority of the pre-service teachers in Singapore would have studied Geography in state schools following prescribed Geography syllabuses. These subject syllabuses make specific reference to the topics that need to be covered, the skills and values that need to be developed and an approximate time frame in which to do these. Teaching strategies and resources are suggested and assessment objectives, formats and weightages are spelt out. Most of these pre-service teachers also pursued their undergraduate degree at the National University of Singapore. The only exception would be the handful of teachers returning from universities abroad. The Ministry of Education (MOE) hires almost all of the teachers, while the National Institute of Education (NIE) prepares them for service. Deployment of staff to schools

http://geography.org.uk/
is also centrally managed by the MOE. This uniformity of educational experience suggests that some of the formative influences on pre-service teachers might be very similar. It also suggests that teachers might practice in very similar ways since they are essentially teaching the same prescribed syllabus. This is something I am interested in unpacking and examining more closely.

Under this veneer of uniformity however, the Singapore education system is a stratified one. From primary through to O and A levels, there is streaming and differentiation of students into more elite or mainstream tracks. For example, at secondary school level, we have students who are in Special tracks, where they study 2 languages at first language level. There are students in the Express track, who complete their secondary education and sit for their O levels in 4 years. Normal academic students complete theirs in 5 years. Normal technical students are prepared in 4 years to enter vocational institutes. In addition to these, there are students in elite through-train tracks, who don’t do their O levels at all, and go on straight to the A levels. Given that students who are streamed into more elite tracks have consistently been exposed to purportedly more innovative curricula and teaching practices than students in mainstream tracks, pre-service Geography teachers may not be entering the service with the same experiences of Geography (or even education). Furthermore, teachers in different tracks may also need to change their practice to suit the particular context in which they are working.

A feature of the Singapore education system that cannot be ignored is its extreme competitiveness. All secondary schools and Junior Colleges (offering A levels) have been ranked on an annual basis since 1992 and the results are published in the local newspapers. The basis for comparing the schools still remains overwhelmingly focused on academic results (Tan, Jason, 2005). In fact Charlene Tan points out that despite the apparent emphasis on developing each child to his/her fullest ability, ‘different talents and abilities are still valued differently’ (2005:7). This competition puts pressure on schools and hence, teachers, to focus narrowly on outcomes that are relevant for public ranking, and this is especially the case in the Singapore context where examinations remain a key determinant of educational and social mobility (Tan, Jason, 2005). The emphasis on examination results creates intense rivalry between schools, between departments in a school and between teachers. It also creates mistrust between the MOE and schools, school leaders and staff (Lim, 1998). These conditions suggest profound implications for teachers’ practice in the classroom and are especially relevant when we take into consideration that students’ results (whether in major academic exams or in sports and other competitions) is one of the factors by which teachers are ranked on an annual basis, and which affect the performance bonuses that teachers receive. Given also that most teachers in Singapore attended a local school system where they were drilled to perform well in examinations themselves, it may not be surprising if they teach in the same mould, since it is the method they are most familiar with.

The Teacher as Embodied
The final strand in this discussion on power, context and pre-service teachers’ conceptions and practice is that teachers have bodies, and that bodies matter. Foucault argues that power does not reside with one person or one group of persons. Instead an invisible and diffuse societal power disciplines the body. For example, in *Discipline and Punish* (1991), Foucault draws on the metaphor of the *Panopticon*, a prison where the captive is always visible and the captor never. Hence, from the captive’s perspective

http://geography.org.uk/
there is always the possibility that he/she is being observed. As a consequence, he/she never actually has to be under surveillance; the possibility is enough (Erlandson, 2005: 663). This implies that each individual carefully and anxiously polices his/her own body and bodily actions, unsure of when he/she might be observed. Foucault further argues that the techniques of discipline that were refined in prison, have distributed throughout society, which is constantly policing the individual body, and disciplining it to conform to societal norms.

Given that teachers spend hours in front of their students, subject to their scrutiny, and that most schools have certain minimum requirements for teachers’ appearance, it is surprising that a lot of the earlier academic research into subject conceptions and teachers’ practice tended to focus on teaching as a disembodied cognitive process. In fact, however, it is often the body of the teacher that is subject to Foucault’s disciplinary surveillance, and which is intimately entwined with discourses that police and evaluate the teacher. One of the earlier theorists to highlight the importance of the teacher’s body and address the omission of the body is bell hooks (1994). As a feminist thinker, she was concerned with the Cartesian split between the mind and body of the teacher.

Trained in the philosophical context of western metaphysical dualism, many of us have accepted the notion that there is a split between the body and the mind. Believing this, individuals enter the classroom to teach as though only the mind is present, and not the body (bell hooks, 1994:17)

bell hooks argues that this is both untenable and unrealistic, as it assumes that the self is ‘presumably emptied out the moment the (classroom) threshold was crossed’ (1994:17). Since then, other writers have examined the ways in which the bodies of teachers are an integral part of teaching and learning. After all, as noted by Freedman and Holmes (2003:7), we need to ‘discard the fiction that the teacher has no body’, and acknowledge that ‘Visible and/or invisible, the body can transform both the teachers’ experiences and the classroom dynamics’. However much of this literature is autobiographical and theoretically informed - more research is required on whether this assertion is supported by evidence, and also the extent to which the body is significant relative to other contextual factors. More specifically, I am interested in exploring how the pre-service teachers’ embodiment, and societal regulation of their bodies, affects their subject conceptions and classroom practice. The integration of the body with the other factors for analysis is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

http://geography.org.uk/
Conclusion
This paper is a work in progress and marshals together the various elements that I believe are important in my study of pre-service Geography teachers’ subject conceptions and practice (in Singapore and beyond). It has also tried to pull these different strands together by way of an analytical framework (Figure 2) that can aid in operationalising the research process.

References
Bell Hooks (1994), Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practise of Freedom, London: Routledge


http://geography.org.uk/


Foucault, M (1971), ‘Order of Discourse’, Social Science Information 10(2), 7-30


Tan, C (2005), ‘Driven by pragmatism: issues and challenges in an ability driven education’ in Tan, Jason & Pak Tee, Ng (eds), Shaping Singapore’s Future: Thinking Schools, Learning Nation, Singapore: Prentice Hall, pp. 5-21

Tan, J (2005), ‘the marketisation of education in Singapore: what does this mean for Thinking Schools, Learning Nation?’ in Tan, Jason & Pak Tee, Ng (eds), Shaping Singapore’s Future: Thinking Schools, Learning Nation, Singapore: Prentice Hall, pp. 95-111


http://geography.org.uk/
Review 1

What did you like about this paper?
The paper is well written with a clear structure and accessible academic style. The framework for analysis of the context for pre-service teachers’ conceptions and practice in geography teaching is a useful tool and draws appropriately on previous research in the field. The paper goes on to identify an important gap in research - that of the relationship between mind and body in geography teachers’ practice. The idea, taken from Foucault, that the teacher’s body is subject to ‘disciplinary surveillance’ that polices action to keep within societal norms, is an interesting one.

What would you like to see more of in the paper? Are there any issues that you would like the author to consider?
- Is there a distinction to be made between subject conceptions and subject conceptions within an educational context (e.g. conceptions of geography and conceptions of geographical education)?
- I realise that this is a work in progress, but as it currently stands the section on the Singapore context does not appear to have much relevance to the rest of the paper. I imagine this section will take on greater significance once empirical data are gathered, analysed and discussed.
- Learning as an embodied activity is an area that is developing within teacher education, but how this links to disciplinary surveillance and the possible effect this might have on teachers’ subject knowledge (as represented in figure 2) requires further explanation.

Do you have any additional references that you would like to see included?
I have found the following very useful: Sandra Kerka (2002) Somatic/embodied learning and adult education. Available as download from [http://www.cete.org/acve/docs/tia00100.pdf](http://www.cete.org/acve/docs/tia00100.pdf). It provides a very brief overview of embodied learning as a concept, followed by a list of sources that provide insights from sociology, dance, nursing, and adult education for using somatic approaches to learning.

Where would you recommend the author should consider for publication of this article?
In its present form, taking into account the suggestions above, this could be considered for inclusion within the Forum section in IRGEE, perhaps as part of a forum on teacher education, or embodied learning. If the ideas contained here were discussed in greater depth, with perhaps the addition of data from the Singapore context, this would be of interest to readers of journals such as EER and IRGEE, and Geography (England) or Geographical Education (Australia).

Review 2

What did you like about this paper?
This paper is very clearly written, well structured, and presents an interesting argument. It is accessible to readers not familiar with the theoretical and geographical context. The combination of style and structure support the cumulative argument made. The topic itself is, I think, of great interest to GeogEd readers, the wider geography education community, and probably beyond. The theoretical work is clearly related to concrete, practical aspects of geography teaching, which makes the more abstract concepts relevant. The contextual information provided about Singapore is useful (and interesting), acquainting readers with relevant aspects of this different system.

What would you like to see more of in the paper? Are there any issues that you would like the author to consider?
Overall, the paper is so promising, I would simply like to see more in terms of where the empirical research leads! Assuming this develops into a full research paper (and I really hope it does) I would be fascinated in the methods that have been used and their relationship to the conceptual framework developed. Within the paper as it stands, I would appreciate a little more on where the components of Figure 1 came from, and a fuller explanation of Figure 2 and how it is different from Figure 1, how the ‘body’ is represented there. The paper might further be strengthened by stressing explicitly how the research is different from/ adds to existing empirical work, and perhaps introducing more critiques of that work.

Do you have any additional references that you would like to see included?
I have none specifically to recommend, but perhaps some citation of studies which have used a similar conceptual framework might help people get a sense of how the theories translate into empirical work. (On a pedantic note: please check spelling of Barratt Hacking [not Barrett-Hacking])

Where would you recommend the author should consider for publication of this article?
I think there is a great deal of potential here, and would say aim high! A full research report would be worth sending off to Teaching and Teacher Education (though this is for a general rather than geography-specific audience so would require some extra work on contextualisation/relevance/conclusions). Within the geography education field, IRGEE would be a suitable venue - and I would see a paper as adding a really nice type of work to what they publish there.

http://geography.org.uk/