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Teachers' conceptions of essential knowledge for integrated social education: a middle years of schooling perspective from Australia

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Background

The proposed Australian history curriculum raises questions about how the teaching of social education in Australia may best be achieved. For the last decade Australian schools have taught Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE), a key learning area which integrates the humanities and social sciences in the primary and middle years of schooling. However, the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) set new directions for Australian education. SOSE was replaced with a new, humanities-based learning area within which individual discipline-specific syllabuses will be developed. In 2011, the national history curriculum (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) will be introduced in schools and the national geography curriculum will be finalised.

The term "social education" is used in this paper to describe the integrated, humanities-based key learning area of school study in Australia known as Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE). Under SOSE, history, geography, economics, environmental education and civics and citizenship are integrated into one learning area. Internationally, integrated social education is often referred to as "social studies" following the lead of the USA (Diem, 2002).

This paper reports findings from a doctoral study of thirty Queensland middle school teachers' conceptions of "essential knowledge" for teaching social education.

Research Questions

The paper focuses on the following research question:

What are Queensland middle years teachers' conceptions of essential knowledge in social education?

Methods

In Australia, integrated social education or SOSE draws on disciplinary frameworks but promotes a multidisciplinary approach where the distinctive elements of the disciplines are brought together in the one learning area (Johnston, 2007). While integrated study promotes the ideals of middle schooling (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2005; Beane, 1997), it presents significant and hitherto unexamined challenges regarding the knowledge base of middle school teachers.

This qualitative paper explores the phenomenon of teachers' conceptions of essential knowledge using phenomenography. The object of phenomenography is to focus on the way a phenomenon is experienced in order to identify the variation in the ways of experiencing the phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty middle school SOSE teachers from state and private schools in the Brisbane metropolitan area. Thematic analysis revealed over twenty-five different pools of meaning. These were grouped and logically ordered into seven qualitatively different conceptions and presented in an "outcome space", contributing to new understandings about social education.

Frame

Shulman's theory of the knowledge base for teaching (1986; 1987) forms the theoretical frame for this inquiry. Shulman's theorization of teachers' knowledge and professionalization (Grossman, Wilson & Shulman, 1989; Wilson, Shulman & Richert, 1987; Shulman & Sherin, 2004) has inspired a large research literature on teachers' specialised subject matter knowledge which has dominated the drive for certification and teaching standards over the last twenty years. Shulman theorized that teachers' knowledge base broadly comprises content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curricular knowledge (Shulman, 1986; Turner-Bissett, 2001) based on the need for teachers to understand and transform disciplinary subject matter for teaching. The study seeks to theorize integrated social education and consider the extent to which teachers' conceptions reflect the Shulman paradigm.

Seven qualitatively different conceptions of knowledge for social education were found using a phenomenographical approach:

- disciplinary knowledge,
- curriculum knowledge,
- the integration of general knowledge and core learning skills,
- a knowledge of middle school learners and appropriate pedagogy,
- knowledge of topical or current affairs,
- knowledge derived from SOSE teaching experience and
- teacher professional identity.

Research findings

Teachers expressed confidence in at least one of the disciplines which underpin SOSE but emphasised teaching disciplinary *skills* rather than content. Significantly, identity as a discipline specialist remained an important dimension of their essential knowledge.

The study is a snapshot of middle school social science teachers' conceptions of essential knowledge for teaching integrated social education. It theorizes integrated social education in middle school as a valuable learning area because it centres on student-centred learning supported by disciplinary knowledge. The study exposes the renewed discontinuity between mandated curriculum theory as represented by the emerging discipline-based Australian curriculum and teachers' conceptions of essential knowledge for their role.

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