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# **An analysis of individual and departmental geographical stories, and their role in sustaining teachers**

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## **Abstract**

Teaching can be a hard job, and sustaining teachers throughout their career can be a challenge, facing pressure from performativity, increasing accountability, and increases in teacher workload (Clarke, 2013; Ball, 2003). Findings are presented from an ethnographic study of secondary school geography departments in England. Every teacher in these departments told compelling stories about their personal histories that have led them to being a geography teacher. The areas of subject specialism they claim are not arbitrary, but are often described through narratives in which events from childhood, schooling, and university are re-told, emphasising their long-standing acquaintance with, and passion for certain geographical issues. Departmental organisational types are discussed, and significant differences between departments are highlighted. Within departments, teachers' individual geographical stories may be re-told to construct collective narratives. These departmental, collective stories position teachers in relation to one another, and offer a further dimension of support for teachers' identity and status. Further, longitudinal research is suggested as one way of developing understandings about the ways in which teachers' individual stories might be re-told in dialogue with the collective stories told by their departments.

Keywords: geographical stories, subject expertise, subject departments, geography education, teachers

I can still remember my first geographical memory, my first fascination was when I was three, and it was November 1963 and it was the eruption of Surtsey, and I can remember watching that one the television in black and white, on the news, and being absolutely fascinated...that's the first thing I can remember. (Ruth, Town Comprehensive, interview 1:108)

I love volcanoes – I am obsessed with volcanoes – I have been since I was 12 [laughs]. Everything that I do I will try and do something with a volcano, or put in a picture of a volcano...every opportunity I now try and go and see a volcano... (Pam, Beach Academy, interview 1:20)

...it's that connection that you have with the local landscape - which is why I cycle to work instead - so you're kind of out and you're in that environment again... you're still part of that kind of landscape before you've come to work, you've already immersed yourself in it, which I think is a really positive thing before you come to work and you're teaching kids about the landscape... (Hugh, Beach Academy, interview 1:89)

These memories and stories about geography were described by teachers in England during ethnographic research on teachers and departments. The research was primarily about subject knowledge, exploring questions about their knowledge work, and their views on the relationship between school and academic geography. An important finding is that these teachers often present themselves and their geographical knowledge through narratives encapsulating their experiences, responses, current and future intentions. Teachers' stories seem to be constructed in relation to the retelling of other stories within departments, and so these shared spaces are argued to contribute significantly to teachers' understandings and presentations of themselves.

This paper focuses on contrasts between individual and collective stories, making explicit two main levels of analysis; individual teachers, and departments. At the individual level, one teacher (Hugh) is presented to illustrate a personal geographical story which provides daily inspiration for his teaching. At the departmental level, one department in 'Town Comprehensive' is analysed to illustrate a collective geographical story which provides identity and status for the teachers. Arguments have been made to suggest that the autonomy, identity, status and judgement of teachers have been undermined through centralisation of decision making and 'policy ratchet', particularly in England (Ball, 2008; Furlong, 2004). Teachers' geographical stories presented below are argued to offer resistance against the 'visceral – and eviscerating – effects of neoliberal education policy reforms on the professional identities of teachers' (Clarke, 2013, p.230). These stories also provide opportunities through which teachers' conceptions of the subject might be examined.

### **Teachers' changing conceptions of geography**

Research on teachers' conceptions of geography suggests that teachers have strong views about the subject, and there are often marked differences between teachers' views (Catling, 2013; Martin, 2000; Morley, 2012; Walford, 1996). Barrett Hacking (1996), who refers to these views as 'geographical persuasions', argues that trainee teachers 'suspend' their geographical persuasions when teaching school geography lessons: being aware they held individual assumptions about what geography is, they felt the need to aspire to a 'neutral' position, possibly feeling the perspective to be adopted ought to be derived more directly from official policy or curriculum documents.

A different model of influences on teachers' conceptions of school geography is offered by Lambert (2002), who suggests that teachers' geographical persuasions may exert a stronger influence at the start of their career: over time, teachers are socialised into an acceptance of other concerns, including conceptions of geographical knowledge promoted by awarding bodies (Puttick, 2015). These conceptions of the subject are an important part of the geographical stories teachers tell, and it these stories are used to express views about the nature of geography. Teachers' conceptions of the subject have been argued to be significant for their teaching because of the effect they have on the geography to which their students are introduced (Catling, 2013). The importance given to teachers' subject conceptions leads Catling (2013) and others (Brooks, ), to call for teachers and particularly those working in initial teacher education to seek out ways of developing and expanding teachers' conceptions of geography. These conceptions of geography may be reconstructed and refocused in relation to other narratives and discourses within school subject departments. For example, Winter and Firth (2007) provide one striking individual example of a teacher's conception of geography changing over time, which they argue was directly affected by the school. The teacher is presented as, at the start of her PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate of Education; a one year teacher education course that, in the UK, also currently leads to Qualified Teacher Status) conceiving of knowledge as 'socially constructed, 'perspectival' and contested' (p.352). This is contrasted with her later position on knowledge as 'objective fact' (p.352). Specific aspects of the school include 'the performativity culture', and the 'framework of objectivist knowledge content prescribed by the A2 [the final part of the UK 'A' Level; the main formal geography examination for 16-19 year olds in the UK] examination specification' (p.352). They argue that 'in response to this situation, the teacher made a pragmatic shift in her focus from a view of knowledge as socially

constructed, towards a view of knowledge as objective fact' (p.353). Here, the teacher's conceptions of geography seem to be radically reformed in relation to the 'culture' of the department and its interpretation of examination specifications.

Alexandre (2009) argues that the school is a complex notion that exerts a significant influence on teachers' conceptions of school geography. For him, *the school* should be understood as something primarily based on teachers' own experiences of school as students. He argues that neither recent education policy nor understandings of academic geography as experienced during undergraduate study are able to displace prior conceptions of school geography. His study is based in Portugal, where there have been policy level efforts to create a closer relationship between school and academic geography: school geography has been explicitly 'designed to reflect the evolution of geography at academic level' (p.253). He portrays the developments of academic geography as being associated with changes in the nature of knowledge; towards more situated, contingent epistemological positions, which he contrasts against teachers' conceptions of geography as 'encyclopaedic', providing a list of places, facts and statistical data (p.254). A similar conclusion is drawn by Alkis (2009), on the basis of a survey that he coded using Catling's (2004) categories; Earthist, Interactionist, Placeist, Environmentalist, and Globalist. Again, the trainee teachers' conceptions of geography seemed to be strongly based on their own prior experiences of school geography as students. Alkis argues that the trainee teachers in his sample developed 'traditional' views of school geography whilst they were school students, and these ideas were not significantly altered by experiences of academic geography as undergraduates: their conceptions of school geography 'survived any pluralist tendencies of their university

courses' (p.132). However, both Alexandre (2009) and Alkis (2009) themselves argue that the findings from their large scale questionnaires are limited by their methodology; their survey approach did not allow them to explore teachers' conceptions in the detail they believe is necessary. Therefore, they both strongly suggest that future research should adopt smaller scale, in-depth approaches. Brooks' (2007, 2010) research with experienced teachers provides an important example of a more in-depth approach. She discusses five cultures of influence, including 'departmental ethos' as a sub-section of geography education culture (p.62). Another of her cultures is 'the school', within which the department might also have been located. Departments are located as a sub-section in a similar way to the dominant approach of the literature on teacher culture, which 'focuses principally on cultures at whole school level rather than within the smaller unit of secondary school subject departments' (Childs, Burn, & McNicholl, 2013, p. 38). With moves to situate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) increasingly within schools (DfE, 2010), teachers' most immediate social and subject context - the department - may be increasingly important to understand. This provides part of the rationale for my decision to conduct an ethnographic study of three secondary school geography departments in England. Further discussion of the methodology may be found elsewhere (Puttick, 2014). Attention is given below to stories shared and told collectively within departments, highlighting the ways in which teachers position themselves and are positioned through these stories.

### **School subject departments**

School subject departments are presented by Siskin (1994) as not merely organisational units, or particular areas of a school, but as entities which are predicated on subject

specialisms with their distinctive approaches towards knowledge. Agreeing with Ball and Lacey (1984), Siskin argues that subject departments have remained largely 'invisible' to educational research. Since then, research in school effectiveness has argued for the importance of departments (Sammons, Thomas, & Mortimore, 1997), and smaller scale studies have also suggested that the department plays an important role in teachers' subject knowledge (John & Baggott La Velle, 2004), which includes the types and sources of knowledge that are accepted. Studies of Physical Education (Sirna, Tinning, & Rossi, 2008) and Science (Melville & Wallace 2007; Burn et al. 2007) departments also support these suggestions, as do the experiences of trainee English teachers that Ellis (2009) describes.

Research into school subject departments is often highly evaluative. For example, larger scale studies such as those by Sammons et al., (1997) are concerned with judging effectiveness. In-depth studies also make frequent normative judgements on departmental cultures, for example, as supportive, caring, and friendly, or as exclusive, toxic, and highly gendered. Childs et al. (2013) highlight several potentially problematic aspects of teachers' reliance on unsystematic, unplanned encounters for their developing subject knowledge, although their departments are largely presented as friendly, congenial environments. In contrast, Melville and Wallace (2007) foreground what they see as a lack of distribution, sharing, or debating of knowledge in the school science departments they study. Their research is located in the context of a shortage of science teachers, and (Australian) government policy of recruiting older, non-specialist teachers from other professions. These new teachers have no (or at least no recent) academic experience of science, but may have been working in related areas, such as the



manufacturing industry. Collecting data over ten weeks by observing meetings, lessons, and informal conversations between staff, they are particularly interested in the ways in which new non-specialist teachers are socialised into a department. They provide examples of hidden assumptions the department shares that are hard for new members, particularly non-specialists to engage with: certain knowers are seen as being legitimate whereas others are not, and Melville and Wallace criticise the department for not making explicit the basis on which one is included or excluded. This is similar to the distinction between veteran- and novice- orientated departments made by Childs et al. (2013, p. 37).

Burn et al.'s (2007) analysis illustrates the potentially multiple, rich opportunities departments may offer for teachers' developing subject knowledge:

it was not simply the provision of the physical space that afforded our teachers rich opportunities for learning. As long-standing partners in Internship, both departments had a real commitment to working with and supporting beginning teachers. Further, within both departments there appeared to be an ethos characterized by trust, care and mutual respect, where doubts are shared without fear of feeling like a failure. Thus, in terms of seeking help with knowledge for teaching science, there was an openness to request and offer support. Indeed all members, including student teachers, were seen as legitimate sources of different kinds of knowledge and there was a recognition that this knowledge, held by members with widely different levels of experience, ought to be distributed, shared and debated. (p.434)

### Sample of departments and teachers

The three departments I studied were organisationally different (Table 1).

Name	Organisational type
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Town Comprehensive (TC)	Federate
Beach Academy (BA)	Impacted
City Academy (CA)	Unitary

**Table 1. Department organisational type**

One, in which a teacher discussed further below (Hugh; Beach Academy) is described, in organisational types, as impacted (Busher & Harris, 1999); a 'department' comprised of just one full time teacher. The two other departments in the current study (in schools Town Comprehensive, and City Academy) are similar to Beach Academy in that they are in non fee-paying secondary schools in England. Town Comprehensive is Unitary; a single subject department with its own HoD and space, neither affiliated to nor managed by a larger faculty. City Academy is Federate; a department including several cognate subjects formally working closely together. It is a humanities department which includes history, geography, religious education, and other subjects at post-16 (Summary of teachers in departments in Table 2).

<b>No.</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Dept.</b>	<b>Formal role(s)</b>	<b>Length of service</b> (yrs, inc. current year, ex. training yr)
1	Ruth	TC	Geography teacher. Head of Year Nine	31
2	Steve	TC	Geography teacher. HoD (Head of Department)	10
3	Gemma	TC	Geography teacher. Head of Year Eight	9
4	Jess	TC	Geography teacher (temporary; maternity cover); NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher)	1
5	Hugh	BA	Geography teacher. Informally, HoD	10
6	Tim	BA	Geography (0.5) and History (0.5) teacher; NQT	1
7	Pam	BA	PGCE Geography student teacher	0

8	George	BA	PGCE Geography student teacher	0
9	Richard	CA	Geography teacher. HoD	15
10	Sophie	CA	Geography teacher. Assistant head teacher	8
11	Paul	CA	Geography teacher	7
12	Claire	CA	Geography teacher. Assistant HoD	4
13	Laura	CA	PGCE Geography student teacher	0
14	Tanya	CA	PGCE Geography student teacher	0

**Table 2. Summary of teacher participants**

Differences in organisational types seem to have implications for the ways in which teachers tell their geographical stories. In the impacted department, Hugh's re-telling of a geographical story is primarily individual in that his story is not used to position him in relation to others in the department, nor is it told by others in the department of him. Listening to the geographical stories told in the federate department (Town Comprehensive) – a geography department situated within a wider humanities faculty – there is a marked contrast: strongly interrelated stories are told, discursively constructing a shared departmental identity which in turn offers security and status to the teachers. Both the distinctiveness of teachers' individual strengths and the complementary nature of their strengths are emphasised through their shared story.

### **Hugh: daily immersion in geographical stories**

The discussion of Hugh here focuses on a specific aspect of his daily participation in, and re-telling of a particular geographical story. Hugh was in his tenth year of teaching, all of which had been in Beach Academy. After graduating from his undergraduate degree

(in geography) he gained an MSc in Geology, and then worked as an artist. He subsequently completed a geography PGCE, and maintains links with the university by hosting trainee teachers in his department.

Hugh's role in Beach Academy was as Head of Department (HoD), despite this formal position having recently been redefined, renamed as 'Director of Learning', and given to someone other than Hugh. Formally, Hugh is a geography teacher. In practice, he has the same responsibilities as other HoDs, including; control over which exam board to use, some control over budget, power to allocate students to particular classes, responsibility for schemes of learning, resources, and shared departmental areas (primarily one classroom, one office space, and the virtual shared area, or intranet), and acting as the first point of contact for parents wishing to discuss their child's progress in geography. The Head Teacher introduced Hugh to me as the HoD, and the other teachers in the department also referred to him in this way.

Hugh's geographical story, expressed, experienced, and re-told as a daily immersion in the landscape, provides inspiration and motivation in what can be challenging circumstances. He felt increasingly under pressure, which he attributed to the school's disappointing GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education; the most common examinations taken by 16 year old school students in the UK) results, and a recent Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) inspection which resulted in a judgement of 'three', designating the school as 'Requires

Improvement'. He contrasted the increasing accountability and bureaucracy against the lighter requirements placed on a nearby school judged 'Outstanding' by Ofsted:

There's this huge dichotomy between what we're being asked to produce here, as a school who's been under – not special measures, but near enough – and the element of scrutiny under which, y'know, we're put, compared to...the school which is outstanding, and to me this is about ticking boxes and getting us up to that next level...Because they don't come under any of the kind of scrutiny that we do...And if they came in and saw this [pointing to the Outstanding school's comparatively brief scheme of work] we'd be under the cosh even more. (Hugh, interview 1b:53-59)

For Hugh, being 'under the cosh' refers to further increases in pressure and workload mediated through increasing levels of accountability.

Hugh often challenged aspects of the demands placed on him that he felt unsatisfied with, some of which stem from a felt tension between the geography he would like to teach and that which he is prescribed. A map of areas of subject knowledge Hugh drew during one semi-structured interview <Figure 1> illustrates something of this tension.

< Figure 1. Hugh's map >

Hugh's map is unbounded, and there are two main types of nodes; text in squares, and in circles. Squares, with physical, and human geography are placed in the centre of the page, and are connected together twice. Learners, and sources are also placed in square boxes on the left and right. Circles, which seem to indicate a secondary level below the main square boxes, show examination specification modules. For example; Restless Earth, and Water on Land. 'I suppose that comes from the fact that I'm geared towards looking at GCSE – I'm thinking about how that's kind of set up' (Hugh, interview 1a:75). As Hugh reflected on the separation of human and physical geography, he argued that making this distinction actually

becomes more and more obsolete over time...the physical and the human becomes intertwined – I suppose the only reason I do that is because of the, y'know, the constriction of GCSE specifications and A Level specifications, and working to...someone else's idea of what geography is all the time. (Hugh, interview 1a:79-81)

Restless Earth is linked with 'Natural Sciences', which is an area of subject knowledge that is not the name of a module on the examination specification. Learners are linked to text which is not enclosed in a shape, and includes the terms enquirers and critical questioners. These labels are drawn from a curriculum package bought in by the school, and several other nodes replicate those used in the examination specification. Only one is directly taken from the National Curriculum.

### *Connections with the environment*

Hugh is a very keen cyclist; well respected among the growing numbers of (almost exclusively male) cyclists in school, he completed the 'Dartmoor Classic' (a gruelling 100 mile ride across the National Park) shortly after my final fieldwork visit. His working day begins with his cycle to school, often taking an in-direct route to cover more distance. On Saturday mornings he would occasionally rise at 4am to cycle until 10am, allowing him to then spend the rest of the day with his family. He described his journey to school as an immersion in the landscape:

...it's that connection that you have with the local landscape - which is why I cycle to work instead - so you're kind of out and you're in that environment again...so whilst it's knackered, and, y'know - in terms of the landscape - it's not flat like Oxford! It's still - you're still part of that kind of landscape before you've come to work, you've already immersed yourself in it, which I think is a really positive thing before you come to work and you're teaching kids about the landscape and things like that - I think it's really, really useful. (Hugh, interview 1:89)

Coincidentally, my second fieldwork visit in Beach Academy began with a day of coastal fieldwork for Hugh's GCSE students. The sea and the South Devon coastline <Figure 2> were instructive in Hugh's selection of topics.

<Figure 2. Looking north on the sediment cell studied on the GCSE fieldwork day>

Hugh's description of Beach Academy and the surrounding area as an 'insular place to work' (Hugh, interview 1a:93) motivated him to 'broaden students' horizons' (Hugh, interview 1a:97). He believed the best way to do this was through first understanding their local context:

...I want to broaden students' horizons, but they need to understand what's around them to start with before they can start understanding what's the difference between being somewhere like here and being in a city - because some of them won't even have thought about that - so to understand their local surroundings - but I'm sure that if you live in an inner city area in London somewhere, where your perception of rural isn't going to make sense until you really look at [your] own landscape - and I suppose that's what it is, just being aware of opening your eyes to what's around you, and questioning it, and not just taking everything as read. (Hugh, interview 1:97)

The example Hugh uses – the landscape – reflects his wider interests in physical aspects of geography. His emphasis on, and extension of seeing; *really looking* and *opening your eyes* express ways in which he hopes students might start to explore or *understand* their surroundings. One reason Hugh chose not to teach a module on glaciation to his students was because he felt that not having seen a glacier made it harder to understand:

...there are options to teach [glaciation] at GCSE – I haven't gone into that kind of glacial kind of landscape. I dunno, I suppose it's because it's harder for the students to really understand the context without going there – of really getting an understanding of it – whereas I can tap into that more for their coastal, for

understanding coasts, and they can really start to see that... (Hugh, interview 1b:32)

A long-standing interest in landscapes provided a focus for Hugh's earlier artwork, and his research interest in geology. 'I'm just teaching – this is what I feel about life, what I feel about...the landscape in general' (Hugh, interview 1a:32). 'The landscape' was often used by Hugh to refer to that which geography studies, although he held an open view about what geography might be. That is, he was not concerned with identity politics surrounding disciplinary claims; 'it's not necessarily just geography – this is about just understanding the way the world works' (Hugh, interview 1a:34). His descriptions of what it might mean to broaden students' horizons were relational, embodied, and (possibly paradoxically) informed by a scientific physical geography.

### *Conceptions of knowledge in geography*

Hugh conceived of knowledge in school geography in intensely relational and embodied terms, situated in his teaching of geography in this school, in this landscape. His *knacker*ing bodily experience of cycling to school in order to *immerse* himself in the landscape is an important part of his daily routine. The relationship between himself and the landscape of which he is a part is significant for him, and he wishes it to be significant for his students.

The wider context – or landscape – of which Beach Academy is a part has also been argued to be related to the geographical knowledge taught there. In particular, substantive areas of study are chosen (fluvial processes, coastal geographies), and excluded (glaciation) on the basis of their proximity to the school. Hugh's immersion in the landscape, beginning with his cycled commute, plays an important role in his



conception of geographical knowledge as relational and embodied; it is something he experientially relates to, and he hopes to induct students into a different, more expansive and inquisitive way of being in and seeing the world. Were Beach Academy part of different (for example, inland) space-times, Hugh's belief is that the type of geography they teach would be very different. Hugh's daily narrative of immersion in the landscape is something he experiences and participates in. It is not primarily a story about him, or his strengths, and as a geographical story does little to establish his status or identity. He positions himself not as someone with expert knowledge (although he would be entitled to do this), but more as a fellow traveller and enquirer with his students. It is the landscape they are all sitting at the feet of and learning from; sometimes directly, and at other times mediated through other sources of knowledge, including websites and news from apps on his tablet:

For me it's about apps, it's about the news apps that I've got, and seeing how it kind of links to, to the curriculum that I've got...you've got the BBC news app that comes through on the iPad, and that's what I'll read every morning before I go to work – so 6:30 in the morning I'll check that, and I'll check the cycling news overnight. And then on the way to work I'll check the news app on my phone – and that's not to say that I'm necessarily just looking for geographical things, but if I see something that's useful I can forward that to the inbox of, in particular my A Level students, so they can start to see where you can gather different sources of information from... (Hugh, interview 1a:46)

Having experienced academic geography, Hugh felt confident about selecting sources of knowledge from these frequently updating news apps. Knowing what is *useful* involved a combination of his knowledge about the subject matter (did it have the *detail* and *rigour* he required?) and his knowledge of his students (will they understand it? Is it relevant to them?). The frequency of his app-checking is significant. Hugh makes hundreds of decisions every day; making visible some stories, excluding others. Hugh

provides little commentary on these sources of knowledge, attaching them to emails and forwarding, or linking to them from his geography department twitter account, which students are encouraged to follow. He often presented the sources of knowledge directly to students, and so his decisions about which to include may be particularly important. Most of the time judgements were made very quickly; a headline scanned and ignored, or forwarded in a second or two. His experiences of academic geography, along with his embodied immersion in the landscape seemed to be the basis of his tacit knowledge; his practical decision making about which sources to share.

### **Town Comprehensive: collective stories strengthening identity and status**

In Town Comprehensive, a different kind of story is told. Hugh's story revolved around a landscape in which he and his students are invited to come and participate in; experiencing, then seeking to understand. Aspects of these kinds of stories were also present in Town Comprehensive. For example, one teacher articulated a compelling narrative from early childhood experiences of the environment (or 'physical geography') through to her A Level choices and subsequent teaching career (Puttick, 2014). However, in Town Comprehensive's federate department the stories have an extra chapter in which individual stories are re-told in dialogue with the stories of others in the department. In this re-telling the stories take on additional functions of providing status and identity for the teachers, discursively constructing a vision of the department as a complete entity, the total of which is greater than the sum of the individuals.

Town Comprehensive is a mixed, comprehensive 11-19 secondary school town in Oxfordshire; an inland region in contrast to Beach Academy's coastal location which was described by Hugh as important in his teaching of the subject. There are several other secondary schools (some independent, some comprehensive) within the town, and the comprehensive secondary schools work together as a 'consortium' for sixth form students (16-19 year olds). The geography department is organisationally federate, being situated within a humanities faculty. The Head of Department's line manager is the head of humanities. There is a humanities office <Figure 3>, and budget. There are two other full-time geography teachers (Ruth and Gemma).

The department is organised around three individual classrooms, each 'owned' by a teacher, with their name on the door. The three classrooms are located on a first floor corridor which also houses two sociology / religious education classrooms, a large computing area, the humanities office, and Ruth, the head of year nine's office. There are stairs at both ends of the corridor, and a one-way system operates for students. At lunchtimes the computing area and stairs are patrolled by supervisors (sixth form students and other adults employed for this purpose), while the geography teachers hold revision sessions, catch up classes, detentions, and possibly eat their lunch. The lack of tea making facilities in the office reduces the insulation (Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1995) of the department as they visit the main staff room for cups of tea, during which time they speak with teachers of other subjects.

During the period of my first fieldwork visit Gemma was on maternity leave, and Jess was temporarily in the department on maternity cover. Other major staffing changes happened shortly after the fieldwork: the head of humanities and the head of geography

were both promoted to Assistant Head Teacher positions in different schools (neither with particular responsibility for their respective subjects, and both teaching less than 50% of the classes they currently have). The department, and faculty, will be staffed very differently in the next academic year. When the HoD moved to Town Comprehensive six years ago he brought with him a completely new Key Stage Three (KS3) curriculum from his previous school. Staffing changes provide an acute example of the dynamic nature of school subject departments. These staffing changes also illustrate the different priorities, agendas, and ambitions teachers may have (Wilson, Powney, Hall, & Davidson, 2006). Teaching a subject is only one part of the job, even if the planning, teaching, and marking of the subject comprise the majority of teachers' time, and not just during the school day. However, the subject – geography – was described by the teachers in Town Comprehensive as the most significant reason for them entering teaching. For example, Jess decided to become a geography teacher after moving in with one:

I found it so interesting sitting down and talking to her about it that I kind of, through like looking at her lessons, and this whole discussion about it, I suddenly decided...I wanted to do a geography PGCE. (Jess, interview 1:28)

The subject also defines an important part of how teachers identify themselves: teachers referred to themselves as being a *geography* teacher. None of the teachers in the current study spoke about a desire to enter teaching *in general* (for example, citing general interest in teaching young people, a passion for social justice issues, or a desire to be promoted to management). Instead, it was always with specific reference to geography that they pursued teaching; what Hargreaves and Macmillan (1995) refer to as 'personal identification' (p.143) with the subject. Teachers' belief in the importance of geography was a theme often present in the background, motivating action, being

defended, giving teachers status, and anchoring convictions about the importance of their work.

The HoD was in his tenth year of teaching. After four years as head of KS3 in his previous school he moved to Town Comprehensive six years ago. Despite working 60 to 70 hours per week in a school in which he felt over-worked and under-resourced, he often described the enjoyment geographical knowledge gave him. Maybe it was not 'despite' the wider context of the school, but because of these pressures that the inspiration and enjoyment he got from geography was important. In retelling his geographical story, he strongly identified with certain aspects of the subject, citing a 'really inspiring teacher' who sparked his interest in development issues, and human geography in general. He went on to read human geography at undergraduate level, writing a dissertation on counter-urbanisation and impacts on rural communities. One of the main reasons he gave for feeling negatively about physical geography was a lack of enjoyment, which he linked directly to experiences of pedagogy he disliked. He also attributed these negative experiences to the same otherwise enthusiastic teacher:

I remember my geography teacher obviously didn't like [glaciation] because all his other lessons were really engaging...then glaciation and stuff came out, and out came the textbooks. So I don't really remember learning that stuff because it was textbook work, whereas I remember all the other stuff that he was really enthusiastic about. (HoD, TC, interview 1:48)

Experiences of physical geography at undergraduate level were described in similar terms, contrasting enjoyment against boredom, and facts against interpretation.

Negatives were applied to physical, and positives to human geography:

I very much steered clear of physical geography. I didn't really enjoy it that much in - not really - not enjoy it - I found, I think I found the lectures quite boring - seemed to be quite factual and less interpretive - that's not necessarily the case with all physical geography but that's what I found... I quite enjoyed the

big ideas stuff, more the political stuff - but then I did do some nice environmental science type ones, which I quite enjoyed and did well at...I really enjoy teaching [development] and I feel quite confident about that as well (HoD, TC, interview 1:56-58)

He transferred his notion of enjoyment to other teachers, making a link between strengths and enjoyment: 'I think staff make it clear as well; which ones they enjoy, so, um, Ruth's strength is physical geography and she enjoys physical geography' (HoD, TC, interview 1:87). 'Strength' is an interesting adjective to describe subject knowledge; the opposite is 'weakness', and the terms are associated with power.

The move to position his individual geographical story alongside others in the department creates a significant difference to the individual story told by Hugh above. Each teacher in Town Comprehensive had individual views about knowledge in school geography, which seemed to have been shaped by – and effected a shaping influence on – their experiences of geography at school and university. It seemed to be the case that these individual narratives were further re-told in relation to others in the department, with all teachers emphasising particular aspects of the subject, and using something of a shared language through which to do this. I want to suggest that the way in which the HoD's individual story was told through a strong human/physical dichotomy was in part a discursive construction of the department. I suggest this because of the similarity of language in the framing of individual stories, and also because of the explicit referencing to one another's stories. All the geography teachers in Town Comprehensive spoke about the subject through a physical / human dichotomy, and allocated areas of expertise to one another. The HoD is described (by himself and

others) as a 'human geographer', Ruth is a 'physical geographer', Gemma, and to a certain extent also her replacement, Jess, are seen as a 'balance' in-between:

Ruth: we've got different strengths in our knowledge (HoD & Gemma: uh-humm) but I think we are all pretty knowledgeable (Gemma: laughing) about the kind of stuff we're teaching (HoD: yeah), whereas I think in some departments...the degrees that people have – all of us have got degrees in geography (Gemma: yes) – in terms of what has gone into that degree, it's (Gemma: all different) it's different (HoD: yep)

(TC department interview:163)

Identifying ones-self as 'strong' on certain areas of knowledge created expectations and informal responsibilities, and the department shared a belief in the complementary nature of one another. The status of the teachers in the department was related to their identification as being strong on certain aspects of the subject. These areas of strength were described as having been developed through geographical stories reaching back into the teachers' lives (for example, the HoD's retelling of physical and human geography experiences begin when he was a school student himself). Each story, and the teachers' positioning within the department are neatly divided across the framing devices of human and physical employed by the department, and there is considerable clarity and consistency in the descriptions of one another's strengths.

## Conclusions

Through a presentation of two levels of analysis – individual teachers and departments in Town Comprehensive and Beach Academy – examples of teachers' geographical stories have been presented, and I have argued that these narratives act to sustain and motivate teachers. Some of the stories are interwoven, and inseparable from, the teachers' own lives. Their geographical stories are a significant part of the way in which

they re-tell the narratives of their life. Early experiences of geography are re-told as having shaped subsequent school and university subject choices, which in turn are seen as exerting continuing influence over the ways teachers continue to engage with their subject. The continuity of some of these narratives as they are re-told is striking, portraying a teleological view of life. That is, none of the teachers studied saw their occupation as geography teachers to be something arbitrary. Instead, their current practice was understood as being deeply rooted in – and intentionally derived from – the history of their life.

**\*\*Changing / developing teachers' conceptions of geography??\*** - link back to the literature presented at the beginning – e.g. Catling, Brooks, etc.

By presenting two departments, of different organisational types, I have emphasised the differences in geographical stories that teachers tell, which may be related to the kinds of departments in which they work. Individual teachers have strongly held beliefs about geographical knowledge, which may be related to much earlier experiences, including those as a child, a student at school, and university. These perspectives on geography are an important part of teachers' location within departments, positioning themselves, and being positioned in relation to others. Areas of 'strength' are thus reinforced, and within-department identity politics may be an important aspect of continuing engagements with geographical knowledge.

The ways in which teachers' stories about their geographical knowledge change over time could be further explored through longitudinal research. Teachers' stories might be analysed at different points during their career, and in different departments, offering a development to existing literature on teachers' conceptions of geography which is primarily based on 'snap shots' in time. Longitudinal research following



teachers through their careers (and trainee teachers moving into their first year of teaching) may reveal interesting discursive shifts in the re-telling of geographical stories as they become a part of shared, departmental narratives. Developing these understandings of the nature of changes to teachers' geographical stories – and their related conceptions of geography – will be useful for informing programmes and efforts aimed at developing and expanding teachers' conceptions.

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