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Student teachers' reflections on prior experiences of learning geography¹

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Primary geography education is an important part of initial teacher education. The importance of prior experiences in the development of student teachers has long been recognised and there is growing evidence of the nature of those experiences in areas such as geography. This paper reports the findings of research conducted with one cohort of undergraduate primary student teachers in every college of education in Ireland. The research explores the prior experiences of student teachers as learners of geography and their perceptions of the subject. While there were differences between student teachers from the Republic of Ireland and from Northern Ireland, attitudes towards geography were predominantly positive. Positive experiences focused on interesting and enthusiastic teachers and active and participatory learning approaches. Negative experiences of geography centred on the dominance of textbook-based teaching and the requirement to memorise content. The article argues that by providing positive and negative images of practice in the teaching of geography, students' prior experiences can prompt insight into practices that promote deep learning, facilitate the integration of the personal and the professional dimensions of teaching and provide a starting point for the development of a vocabulary of critique and evaluation.

Keywords: geography; teacher education; prior experiences; attitudes

Introduction

Geography is a statutory curricular area in primary schools in Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland (RoI), geography is located within Social, Scientific and Environmental Education (SESE) along with primary history and primary science. In Northern Ireland (NI), geography, history, science and technology are included in an area of learning called 'The World Around Us'. All graduate primary teachers are required to teach geography as part of the primary school curriculum.

Teacher education in Ireland has been the subject of debate for some time and is now at a 'critical juncture' (Harford, 2010, p. 357). In both jurisdictions, teacher education has had to respond to curricular changes in primary education, i.e. the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Skills & National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [DES & NCCA], 1999) and *The Northern Ireland Curriculum* (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA], 2007) for the RoI and NI, respectively. In NI, undergraduate primary initial teacher education programmes (B.Ed. degrees) have for over three decades been four years in duration, and at the time when the

¹The underlying research materials for this article can be accessed at <http://www.scotens.org/docs/becoming-a-teacher.pdf>

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research for this paper was carried out, the internal structures of the degree courses were similar. However, the structure of the degree in the two institutions now differs; one has retained a 'main subject' or 'subject specialism' structure while the other has moved in the last four years to having no specialism. In the RoI, a decision to extend the duration of teacher education programmes was recently announced by the Teaching Council (2011) and the DES (2011). According to the Teaching Council, 'concurrent programmes should be a minimum of four years while postgraduate programmes of teacher education should take place over two years, thereby facilitating an innovative reconceptualisation of current programmes' (2011, p. 14). As a result, the content and duration of the B.Ed. degree programme has been radically revised with new programmes introduced in September 2012. Hence, the much needed reform of teacher education in the RoI has now officially commenced.

These reforms have implications for all aspects of teacher education including primary geography education. Provision for geography education varies across initial teacher education (ITE) providers and across both jurisdictions, with each provider developing its courses according to its own needs and resources. Historically, the provision for primary geography in ITE has been identified as in need of development (DES, 2002). Consequently, a longitudinal research project was conducted to investigate student teachers' experiences of these areas during their time in college with a view to improve teaching and learning in ITE in Ireland.

Colleges who participated in this study share an approach to primary geography that is founded on the ideas of enquiry, a social constructivist approach to children's learning and a concern with the development of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Waldron et al., 2009). The concept of PCK was developed by Lee Shulman (1986) and has had a significant impact on teacher education. Defined by him as 'subject matter for teaching' (Shulman, 1986, p. 9, original emphasis), it is premised on the idea that there is a particular domain of teacher knowledge at the intersection between subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. Notwithstanding the common approach adopted by teacher educators in both jurisdictions, there are substantial differences in curriculum and assessment in primary- and secondary-level geography in NI and the RoI. NI students, for example, study fewer subjects for their terminal examinations compared to their RoI counterparts. So while fewer in number (both numerically and proportionately) those NI students who study geography follow a different curriculum to a higher level of specialisation.

This article reports on data from a longitudinal study conducted by IASSEE (the Irish Association for Social, Scientific and Environmental Education) in the RoI and NI. Designed as a large scale study, it was conceived as part of a wider inquiry into the practice of IASSEE members with a view to promoting critical reflection, evaluation and review. The study was conducted in the spirit of promoting the dialectical relationship between research and practice, which is part of what it means to be a teacher educator (Cochran-Smith, 2005). While the longitudinal study focused on history, geography and science, this paper draws on some of the data collected in relation to geography. Findings are presented for both the RoI and NI, where there are notable differences or where it can inform discussion. Where the differences are slight, only the overall percentage is given.

Literature review

Reflection on prior experiences has been identified as a critical component of teacher education programmes, recognising the complex and dynamic relationship between prior experiences, perceptions and subsequent practice (Calderhead, 1988; Chan, 2004; Fajet,

Bello, Leftwich, Mesler, & Shaver, 2005; Haritos, 2004; Korthagen, 2004; Martin, 2000, 2006; Sugrue, 2004; Tann, 1993; Tillema, 2000; Younger, Brindley, Pedder, & Hagger, 2004). While earlier research suggested that the relationship between student teachers' beliefs and their practice as teachers bordered on the deterministic (Kagan, 1992), recent studies have suggested a range of relationships that are more fluid. In their 2008 study of student teachers' personal practical theories, for example, Levin and He found student teachers' beliefs to be subject to both continuity and change and influenced by a combination of prior experiences, teacher education coursework and classroom experience (Levin & He, 2008). In the context of geography, research into student teachers prior experiences have focused, *inter alia*, on students' perceptions and preconceptions, on subject knowledge and its implications and on the influence of school settings on practice (Barratt Hacking, 1996; Catling, 2004; Corney, 2000; Martin, 2000, 2006; Morley, 2012). However, Catling (2013) highlights the need for more intensive research in approaches to primary geography, including curriculum development, experiences of student teachers in ITE, and the level of subject-specific knowledge required to teach at primary level.

As with other subjects, the level and nature of subject expertise required in order to teach geography well and the implications arising for initial teacher education have been problematised. As Catling and Morley (2013, p. 439) indicate, the wide range of subjects taught by primary teachers suggests that PCK (Shulman, 1986) may provide the best lens through which to view the question of subject knowledge. Indeed, pointing to the complexity of the relationship between subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, Martin's (2004) study of student teachers found that disciplinary expertise in geography did not necessarily confer an advantage in relation to teaching and suggests that all student teachers are novice teachers in the context of primary geography, regardless of their disciplinary background. Questioning whether student teachers were more influenced by their images of teaching than their prior experiences as geographers and their perceptions of geography, Martin argued the need for student teachers to interrogate perceptions of teaching and learning as well as images of geography; in addition, she proposed opportunities for student teachers to explore the nature of geography, its role in society and its benefit to children's development (Martin, 2000). Subsequent studies by Martin explore the potential of teachers' personal geographical knowledge, their 'everyday' geography as a source from which their conceptual knowledge can be developed (2005, 2008). She has proposed the term 'ethnogeography' which highlights the geographical knowledge available to all learners because of each person's personal geographical knowledge (Martin, 2005). Ethnogeography reflects the view that all students (including student teachers) are geographers because they all live in the world, interacting with a variety of landscapes (human and natural) on a daily basis.

Methodology

This paper is based on data gathered from an all-Ireland longitudinal study. A three-phase study was designed in order to provide data on the changing views of student teachers as they progressed through their ITE programmes. The study consisted of an entry and exit questionnaire and a series of mid-project focus group interviews with 32 students from the sample population. While the complete study involved an exploration of student teachers' attitudes to and experiences of learning and teaching history, geography and science, this paper reports specifically on qualitative elements of the geographical data from the initial survey. A full description of the research instruments is available in the IASSEE research report (Waldron et al., 2009), while an analysis of the quantitative data from the

entry questionnaire can be found in Waldron, Pike, Varley, Murphy, & Greenwood (2007). A copy of the entry questionnaire, upon which this paper is based, is included in Appendix 1.

The study was designed as a non-random study. The target population was all undergraduate B.Ed. students entering ITE courses for primary education on the island of Ireland in the autumn of 2004. The questionnaire was distributed among first year B.Ed. students in all seven participating institutions in NI and the RoI. For the entry questionnaire, there was a potential population of 1358 students and 1114 usable replies were received, giving an 82% response rate. The entry questionnaire aimed to gather biographical data, information about students' own knowledge base, attitudinal data relating to the three subjects and qualitative data regarding their school experiences and their conceptions of what makes a good teacher.

This paper draws on the qualitative data gathered in response to open questions regarding student teachers' school experiences which prompted respondents to give an account of their positive and negative experiences as learners of geography. Responses to the open-ended questions were entered into a Microsoft Excel database and were subjected to a grounded analysis using the constant comparative method (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In asking respondents to recount their most positive and negative experiences, the researchers sought to go beyond a generic description of 'everyday' geography to elicit focused responses which included some level of judgement on the part of the respondents on what constituted a positive and a negative experience of geography. It is acknowledged that by focusing on the extremes, the experiences gathered could be seen to be atypical. Furthermore, as short, spontaneous responses to questions, the accounts are limited by their length and by their spontaneity, which allows little opportunity for reflection and development.

This paper addresses the following research questions:

- What are student teachers' prior experiences as learners of geography?
- What conceptualisations of geography are embedded in their experiences?

Findings

The findings are laid out in response to the two research questions. The knowledge profile of the students is presented initially to contextualise the respondents and the experiences they recounted.

Knowledge profile of student teachers on entry

While, as noted earlier, student teachers' capacity to teach geography is not determined by their level of qualification in the subject, the idea of having sufficient knowledge with which to begin the process of developing PCK justifies some focus on student teachers' formal education in the subject prior to entry into ITE. The entry questionnaire, therefore, included questions on the highest levels of qualification in relation to state examinations achieved by the students in geography. For students from the RoI, the post-16 level of qualification refers to the Leaving Certificate Examination, while for NI students it refers to A level and AS level. The mid-level qualifications are the Junior Certificate Examination (RoI) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) (NI) at age 15/16 approximately. As Table 1 indicates, the percentage of respondents with no qualifications in geography in the RoI was significantly lower than in the NI. For 43% of the RoI cohort, the highest level of qualification was at mid-level (15–16 years), while over half (54%)

Table 1. Student teachers' highest levels of qualifications (%) in geography.

	Location	None	Age 15/16	Age 17/18	Tertiary
Geography	NI	43	24	33	0
	RoI	3	43	54	0.5

Source: Waldron et al. (2007).

went on to achieve a qualification at 17/18 years. For the NI cohort, the equivalent percentages were 24% and 33%, respectively.

As indicated earlier, there are variations between the two systems (RoI and NI) that largely explain differences in qualifications. While the education system in the RoI provides for a broad range of subjects to be taken to Leaving Certificate level, the NI system supports greater specialisation in a narrow range of subjects. Overall, the data indicated that student teachers were entering ITE with a reasonably high knowledge base in geography.

Prior experiences of learning geography

Students were asked to recount their positive and negative experiences as learners of geography. The overwhelming majority of students (89%) identified at least one positive experience, while almost one in three (30%) provided positive experiences only. Sixty-five percent of students recounted some negative experiences of learning geography with 6% indicating a total negative experience. A further 5% failed to respond to the question. When the data were analysed, three main categories emerged: teaching and learning environments (i.e. teaching approaches and classroom environment); teacher characteristics (personal and professional qualities of teachers) and perceptions of the subject (subject-specific comments). Perceptions of geography attracted the largest volume of positive and negative comments (83% and 47%, respectively), with teaching and learning environments constituting the second largest grouping (62% and 35%, respectively) and teacher characteristics comprising the smallest grouping (12% and 9%, respectively).

Perceptions of geography

While students were not asked to write about how they perceived geography, the positive and negative experiences recounted give some insight into their conceptualisations of the subject and into their underlying attitudes towards it. In the course of their comments, they identified a range of concepts, approaches to teaching and areas of learning, which they considered to be specifically geographical.

In terms of the areas of geography highlighted by the students, physical geography was the branch mentioned most frequently by name (7%) with additional multiple comments relating to rivers, mountains, volcanoes and earthquakes. Others (11% and 4%, respectively) associated geography with learning about other countries and cultures, while 3% recounted positive experiences which identified geography with nature and environmental awareness. Fewer (2%) saw geography as having an explicitly local focus.

I loved the nature trails we did at primary level. It instilled a great love and awareness of our environment. Our teachers would let us all grow small plants and we would see at first hand the true meaning of why water was needed for the plant to grow etc.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Field trips, local relevance. Fun, interesting classes. Map reading/investigation was interesting and useful.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Fieldwork emerged as the most frequently referenced positive experience of geography. Cited by 43% of the students, it could be argued that it was seen by the students as the signature mode of geographical investigation, while the use and construction of maps and diagrams was also seen as characteristic. However, some caution is required with regard to this interpretation. In some cases, it was evident that students were referring to a single, memorable example of fieldwork, while in others it represented an ongoing, characteristic practice. Nonetheless, its strong presence was a notable feature of the data and points, at the very least, to it being part of students' conceptualisations of what it means to do geography. Fieldwork will be returned to in the next section.

While not explicitly asked to consider the purpose of geography, issues of value and relevance were embedded in a small number of responses. Some students (5%) saw geography as useful and relevant to everyday life and a source of transferable skills such as map reading. Through geography you could engage with 'issues important in the world today such as future power resources, global warming, recycling, etc.' and come to understand 'why the earth is why it is'.

We didn't learn of other cultures, just the names of places. We learnt off things but didn't learn much about them.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Have always disliked the subject and in fact I'm not 100% sure what is involved apart from maps and locations.

NI, entry questionnaire

I never liked geography. I always felt it was about maps, contour lines, etc. The teacher wasn't good at holding the class's interest.

NI, entry questionnaire

As the quotes above exemplify, perceptions of geography were also embedded in students' accounts of negative experiences. Experiences of this nature are characteristic of rote learning approaches to geography whereby students commit long lists of geographical facts to memory. As noted earlier, this characterisation is predominantly associated with the experiences of RoI students.

There was a bit too much learning and facts, especially in Leaving Cert course. Would have liked more practical work.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Learning large amounts of rivers, countries capitals, towns etc. by heart to regurgitate for test on Friday and once test was over forgetting them completely.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Inevitably, students' own attitudes towards the subject infused the qualitative data. In many cases, these attitudes were tied to specific experiences of teaching approaches,

Table 2. Positive attitudinal and descriptive words.

Attitude/descriptor	Percent (%) of students using terms		
	All ($n = 1114$)	RoI ($n = 871$)	NI ($n = 243$)
Like	6	8	0
Enjoy	12	10	17
Love	4	4	4
Interesting	23	25	16
Fun	3	2	5

Source: Waldron et al. (2009).

aspects of coursework, the dominance of examinations and tests and, in some instances, the subject itself. Tables 2 and 3 lay out the most frequently used positive and negative attitudinal and descriptive words used in the comments according to the percentage of students using them. In some instances, students used more than one positive term.

It is worth noting that almost 1 in 10 of the NI cohort experienced geography as difficult, complex or confusing, while 12% of the overall sample described the subject as boring or dull. Nonetheless, students were predominantly positive in their associations. In terms of their conceptualisations, these were in the main limited and presented a fractured rather than a holistic view of the subject. However, there was some indication of an emerging view of geography as enquiry-based and concerned with broader issues.

Teaching and learning

The majority of student teachers (62%) commented positively on the teaching and learning environments they experienced as learners of geography, referring to approaches and learning activities that they particularly enjoyed and, in some cases, to the general classroom environment which was described as interesting, enjoyable and fun.

Geography room was really stimulating. It was like a museum with glass cases all around the edges – with stones from different places and pieces of bog oak and the teacher also stuck interesting facts on the walls – it made geography very enjoyable.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Table 3. Negative attitudinal and descriptive words.

Attitude/descriptor	Percent (%) of students using terms		
	All ($n = 1114$)	RoI ($n = 871$)	NI ($n = 243$)
Boring/dull	12	11	14
Did not like/enjoy	5	5	4
Not interested	5	5	2
Difficult/complex/confusing	3	2	9
Not relevant	3	3	3

Source: Waldron et al. (2009).

As noted earlier, fieldwork emerged as the dominant positive experience with over 4 in 10 student teachers recalling different examples of work outside the classroom in the local area or in sites distant from the school. The capacity of fieldwork to enliven the learning experience, to make it more memorable and more enjoyable was noted by several. Indeed, student experiences in this regard echo to some extent research findings in the area. A review of research into outdoor learning, for example, found ‘substantial evidence’ that fieldwork, if well-planned and purposeful, promotes cognitive and affective development (Rickinson et al., 2004, p. 24).

Many field trips and outings, this helped me to learn and progress at a quicker rate.

NI, entry questionnaire

We completed fieldwork in secondary school and this was a good experience, it allowed us to experience first hand the geography of Ireland; it is easier to understand when you see it at first hand rather than just in text books.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Other modes of practical or group activity such as project work (6%), making or reading maps (12%), creating diagrams, problem solving and engaging in discussion and debate were also referenced positively in terms of their capacity to promote learning and understanding, as well as their enjoyable character. Implicit in several of these responses was the idea of agency of having opportunities to contribute their opinions and have them heard.

Doing project work – team work made different topics easier to understand.

RoI, entry questionnaire

We did lots of projects on different countries and learned a lot from this and it was fun doing them as we worked in groups. We got to draw things like maps and diagrams so it wasn’t all theory.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Loved the challenging debates on better/worse in human nature.

NI, entry questionnaire

Class discussion. Coming up with our own explanations/solutions for a particular problem or question.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Fieldtrips surfaced again in the recounting of their negative experiences (3%), though largely in the form of complaints that fieldwork experiences were too infrequent or were not provided. In terms of their negative experiences of geography, 35% overall focused on negative aspects of the teaching and learning environments they encountered, identifying particular teaching approaches that they disliked. Location mattered, with 23% of students from NI making negative comments relating to teaching methodologies as opposed to 34% of the RoI cohort. Students recounted spending large amounts of time reading textbooks, listening to textbooks being read by teachers, learning by rote, writing notes and copying material from books. Indeed, almost one third of the RoI students who commented on negative experiences identified rote learning of textbooks, notes and lists of physical features as characteristic experiences. This was predominantly a concern of the RoI students with only a handful of the NI cohort ($n = 4$) mentioning a similar experience. The majority of comments related to the ‘learning off’ of lists of rivers, mountains,

lakes and towns as part of their primary geography experience, and the need to memorise essays and textbooks in preparation for examinations.

I loved geography in primary school; however, learning off the towns and rivers in Ireland by heart was stressful and I don't really remember them today.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Learning pages and pages of useless notes. Learning pages off by heart rather than knowing the content.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Textbook-dominated teaching was specifically identified as an issue by 70 respondents, mostly from the RoI, while some found the work to be unchallenging and lacking in creativity. For others (7%), map work was considered to be either boring or difficult.

Did hardly any in primary school and in secondary school, it was all just text book so it was boring. Junior Cert standard isn't challenging enough.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Never settled in a geography class. Didn't enjoy it, could never read maps or any other types of graphs and tables. Found it very boring at secondary level and never looked forward to the class.

NI, entry questionnaire

In summary, students valued participative, collaborative and enquiry-based approaches to geography which they saw as more enjoyable and more conducive to learning. While both cohorts identified the requirement to memorise as an issue, textbook-dominated lessons and rote learning of texts and lists of physical features was more evident in the RoI data. The lack of creativity and challenge in much of the work required of students was seen as a disincentive to learning.

Teacher characteristics

For some respondents (12%), the personal and professional qualities of their teachers had a significant positive influence on their experiences as learners of geography. Students used a wide range of terms to describe their teachers in this regard, such as 'interesting', 'enthusiastic', 'great', 'brilliant', 'excellent', 'dynamic', 'motivated', 'dedicated', 'kind' and 'helpful'.

Teacher was really lovely and kind. She didn't shout if you don't know something. She understood that not everyone loved geography.

NI, entry questionnaire

Professional characteristics, such as the ability to motivate, to explain and to plan interesting experiences, were valued.

Every student was interested because the teacher engaged with the class and provided us with, believe it or not, facts which were very interesting.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Had a great teacher that helped me when having trouble and explained things well.

NI, entry questionnaire

One student noted how the teacher integrated her/his personal experiences of geography into the classroom work:

Teacher explained things quite clearly. Told us about their own experiences of seeing certain geographical sites etc.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Teachers were also described as having a negative impact on student learning and motivation to study geography. Using terms such as ‘boring’, ‘unenthusiastic’, ‘awful’, ‘poor’ and ‘uninterested’, almost 1 in 10 responses exemplified passive learning experiences, led by uninterested teachers whose teaching style rarely varied:

Possibly the worst teacher I ever had for Leaving Certificate. His level of enthusiasm, interest and drive was abysmal; he really didn’t inspire us to work hard or to study.

RoI, entry questionnaire

Paradoxically, too much passion was also cited as an issue, while others recounted experiences where a teacher’s level of classroom control – whether overly strict or lax – led to unproductive or uninteresting lessons.

Teacher so passionate about geography didn’t understand that you could have a difficulty, endless map drawing, found it very difficult.

NI, entry questionnaire

We had one teacher who used to donate all of her time to the unruly pupils. I found this very unfair. I remember asking her to show me how to read Ordnance Survey maps and she never came to me.

RoI, entry questionnaire

It is evident from the data that students recognise the affective and relational character of teaching and learning, and the personal and professional dimensions of teacher identity. The role of teachers as caring professionals whose practice has a significant impact on students’ well-being is well drawn in the data, while the interaction of teachers’ interest in geography with student motivation to engage with the subject is strongly present.

Discussion

A question of knowledge?

While it is evident that the geographical knowledge base of student teachers within both jurisdictions varies from deep engagement to little or no engagement with previous formal education programmes, all students who constructed accounts of their experiences displayed some geographical knowledge. Over half of the RoI cohort and one in three student teachers in the NI cohort had reached the highest level of qualification available in the system prior to entry into third level education. This indicates a substantial core group of ITE students in both jurisdictions with significant experience in geography. On the other hand, 4 in 10 NI student teachers had no experience of geography beyond primary level, while a similar proportion of RoI students terminated their formal study of geography at age 15/16 years. This mixed knowledge base raises challenges for teacher educators working with groups of student teachers. How can teacher educators build on the wealth of formal knowledge which exists in some cases, while addressing its absence in

other cases? Could it also be argued that, despite or perhaps because of their experiences of geographical learning in a formal context, the majority of student teachers on entry exhibit understandings of geography that run counter to what is needed in order to teach geography well?

In her study of English primary student teachers, Morley found their perceptions of geography to be narrow and predominantly information oriented (Morley, 2012). She cautions, however, that among other things, the research does not take into account how participants experienced geography. Analysis of student experiences as recounted in the data presented here would suggest that while many students experience geography as largely concerned with the memorisation of information (either in the form of lists or in the form of textbook content), there are indications also of a broader experience of 'doing' geography along with some underlying critique of an information-oriented approach to geography, at least in terms of modes of engagement. On the other hand, relatively few students articulated a view of geography as concerned with processes and relations or with explaining the world. Using the three forms of geographical knowledge identified by the Geographical Association (2011) and used by Catling and Morley (2013) in relation to teachers' knowledge frameworks, students' comments contained multiple references to limited elements of 'core' geographical knowledge (areas commonly identified as the content of school geography) and exhibited some fragmented understanding of 'procedural' knowledge through their recognition of fieldwork as a signature mode of geographical investigation. However, there was very little evidence that students had incorporated the conceptual or generalisable knowledge identified in the typography as 'content' knowledge. Despite the evident limitations of their perceptions of geography, and taking on board the bias towards information-oriented conceptualisations, the sense of geography exhibited by the students collectively provides a starting point, an emergent understanding, which, similar to and consonant with Martin's ethno-geographies (2005) offer a context for development in ITE.

A question of practice?

In terms of critique of the system, the study corroborates much of what is known about Irish education at first and second level. Consistent with the findings of a range of studies, textbooks and textbook-based teaching continue to exert significant influence on children's and young people's experiences as learners at primary and post-primary levels (Eivers, Shiel, & Cheevers, 2006; NCCA, 2008a, 2008b). While both RoI and NI students shared concerns relating to rote learning of factual information and the negative influence of examinations on classroom experiences, they were more characteristic of the negative experiences of the RoI cohort. This tendency towards passive learning experiences is reflected in a number of studies whose findings suggest that Irish teachers engage far less with active learning and student-oriented practices, such as group work and projects than teachers in other countries (Cosgrove, Gilleece, & Shiel, 2011; Shiel, Perkins, & Gilleece, 2009).

What is interesting here, however, from the perspective of ITE, is not that student teachers' experiences have been characterised in many cases by passivity or dominated by rote learning or textbooks, though knowledge of those experiences for teacher educators is essential. Rather it is that having had these experiences, even where they were not also balanced by the positive experiences of active learning, geographical investigation and supportive teachers, many student teachers recognised the consequences in terms of superficial learning and student alienation. If meaningful and ongoing opportunities are

provided within ITE for students to deconstruct their experiences and to use them and reuse them as touchstones for critique then, rather than providing obstacles to their development as teachers, these experiences and the learning that derives from them could facilitate transformative reflective practice.

A question of identity?

While the experiences recounted by student teachers placed more emphasis on the actions of teachers than on their personal characteristics, there was, nonetheless, considerable recognition of the influence of the teacher as person and as professional on the quality of learning in geography. Students recognised the interaction between teachers' personal qualities such as kindness and enthusiasm, professional qualities relating to interest in geography and the capacity to plan and to manage, and the affective and cognitive dimensions of their experiences as learners. The need to enable student teachers to integrate their personal and professional identities as teachers through reflection and to place a sense of mission at the core of teacher identity has been strongly argued as a key component of teacher education (Korthagen, 2004, 2012). In addition, there has been a growing recognition of the relevance of the feminist ethic of care to educational practice (O'Brien, 2012). This approach foregrounds the need for teacher education to promote a caring, relational and dialogic practice, if student teachers are to emerge as professionals capable of promoting human flourishing through humanising education (Noddings, 2003; O'Brien, 2012). Students' prior experiences as learners of geography and their recognition of the role played by the person of the teacher in defining those experiences provide a rich context for that integrative process to begin.

Conclusion

The idea of interrogating preconceptions has become an accepted practice in initial teacher education. It is justified historically by the argument that the student teachers' beliefs and experiences as learners can lead them to reject the more innovative and challenging practices of ITE when faced with the challenges of the classroom (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997), an argument that has led to ITE being characterised as a 'relatively low impact enterprise' (Tann, 1993). However, the evidence here suggests that, while student teachers may at times conflate acquiring information with learning, they can articulate critiques of those experiences that are, in many cases, productive and insightful and demonstrate an emerging framework and vocabulary of critique which can serve as a starting point for self and peer evaluation. It can also, and perhaps most importantly, serve as a springboard for the deconstruction of school culture relating to the teaching of geography, a factor which has been identified as a powerful influence on student teachers' capacities to implement the pedagogical approaches endorsed by ITE (Barratt Hacking, 1996). Furthermore, the study suggests that student teachers begin their teacher education with a deep sense of the importance of the person of the teacher and the affective dimensions of teaching and learning, recognising the agency of teachers in the construction of learning environments and the negative impact of passive and disempowering environments on student learning. In the context of the reconceptualisation of geography education courses in ITE currently underway in the RoI, these findings offer several points of departure for the enhancement of initial teacher education programmes, linking prior experiences and personal geographical knowledge or ethnogeographies (Martin, 2005) and developing students' nascent frameworks of critique through an iterative reflective process.

This study also provides an insight into student teachers' experiences of and perceptions of geography that contribute to the growing evidence base in the area. While perhaps limited by its focus on positive and negative experiences which may be atypical of students' more general experiences and by the spontaneity of the responses collected, which do not allow for the development that could occur in other settings, this paper has been informed by related studies such as those conducted by Martin (2006, 2008) and Morley (2012), and adds to the existing literature insight into the context of learning geography in Ireland. It addresses an important gap in the literature which has been identified by Catling (2013).

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Appendix 1: Entry questionnaire

Section A: Biographical information

1. About you. Please circle as appropriate.

I am ...	Female		Male	
I am studying at ...	St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra	CICE, Dublin	Coláiste Mhuire, Dublin	Froebel College, Dublin
	Mary Immaculate College, Limerick	St. Mary's University College, Belfast	Stranmillis University College, Belfast	

2. Please indicate all qualifications that you have in Geography, History and Science.

- Write the **exact** title **and** level of each qualification e.g. AS Level Human Biology; GCSE Science Double Award; Leaving Certificate Physics (Honours).
- If you are not sure that a qualification 'counts' as Geography, History or Science, e.g. Home Economics, write it down anyway.
- Please do not specify grades.
- If you have no qualifications in a subject, please write 'none'.

Geography	
History	
Science	

3. Your academic subject(s) on the first year of the BEd course.
 Students at CICE, Coláiste Mhuire and Froebel College should not answer this question.

My academic subject(s) in the first year is/are . . .		
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Section B: Your experiences of Geography, History and Science as subjects at school.
 Please give examples of your most positive and negative experiences.

- You may include experiences from primary- and secondary-level school.
- If you cannot think of any example, or you did not study the subject at school, please write 'none'.

<i>Geography at school</i>	
Positive experiences	Negative experiences
<i>History at school</i>	
Positive experiences	Negative experiences

Section B: Your experiences of Geography, History and Science as subjects at school
 (Continued)

<i>Science at school</i>	
Positive experiences	Negative experiences

Section C: Your attitudes towards Geography, History and Science as subjects.

For each statement circle a number that corresponds with how you feel.							
	strongly agree ←————→ strongly disagree						
I like Geography	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I like History	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I like Science	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I think Geography is an important subject for Primary children	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I think History is an important subject for Primary children	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I think Science is an important subject for Primary children	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section D: Your ideas about teaching Primary School Geography, History and Science.

What do you think makes a good teacher of Primary Geography?	
What do you think makes a good teacher of Primary History?	
What do you think makes a good teacher of Primary Science?	

For each subject, circle a number that corresponds with your <u>current</u> level of confidence about teaching the subject at Primary level.							
	confident —————> not confident						
Teaching Primary Geography	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teaching Primary History	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teaching Primary Science	1	2	3	4	5	6	7