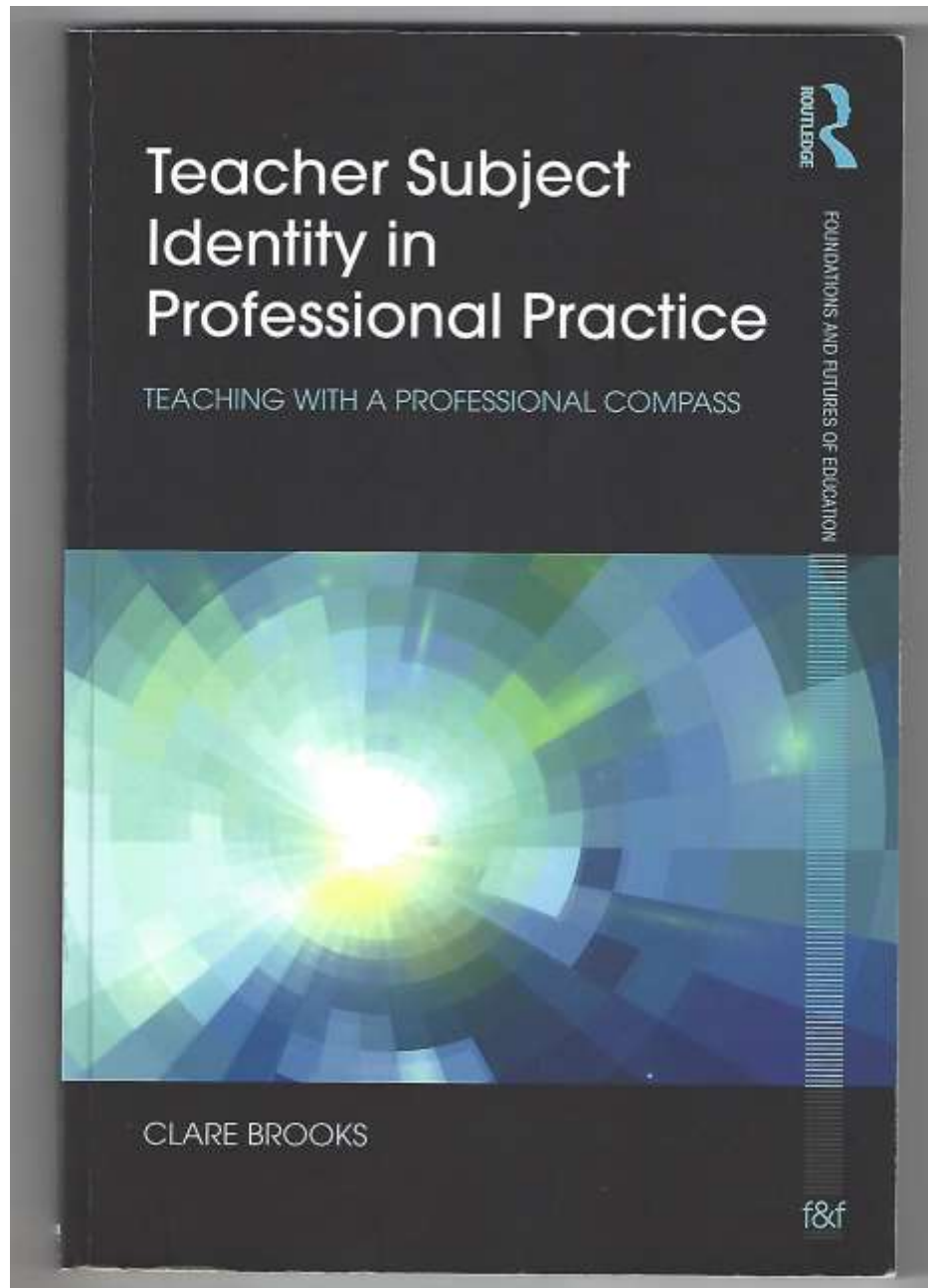


## **Teacher Subject Identity in Professional Practice: Teaching with a Professional Compass**



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I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. While the title may not suggest that this book is of direct interest to the readership of RIGEO, the contents most definitely are. Brooks has based her search for what constitutes the subject identity of a teacher and how it both influences and is influenced by their professional development, very firmly in her own experiences as a Geography teacher educator. Indeed, the book draws heavily on her own doctoral research. The examples used in the text are drawn from the English education system.

The book is well written and engaging - a first sentence that reads ‘Steven had always wanted to be a geography teacher’ (p.1) is bound to go down well with the Geography education community!

The book presents a compelling picture of the importance of the academic subject for a secondary school teacher, providing a range of interesting and varied narratives concerning the teachers she has studied over a number of years. At the same time, it is made clear that this is not simply an attempt to identify how proficient Geography teachers are with their subject. She states: ‘while it is acknowledged that what you know is important up to a point, it is how teachers use that subject knowledge that appears to be key beyond that’ (p.99). Rather, she investigates a complex picture of how ‘moral and ethical stances towards teaching generally, and teaching geography specifically, were related to ... subject-based identity’ (p.13). The use, application and influence of a subject-based narrative by practicing Geography teachers within a range of changing educational contexts is the central focus of the book.

Brooks is aware of the changing and contingent nature of the professional position of the teacher, discussing the factors that at various points orient professional life in different directions (p.21). To achieve this, Brooks uses the term ‘professional compass’ as an active metaphor: as something that can assist teachers in situating themselves within educational debates and contexts and can influence how they proceed in such situations. Brooks considers the professional compass to be something that can:

- ‘Direct a teacher in their professional decision making ... and, as such, can enable teachers to distinguish between teaching young people and seeking to educate them
- Operate at a variety of levels within classroom practice and wider engagement in education and school life
- Enable teachers to move beyond a ‘delivery’ mode of instruction to become ‘curriculum makers’ responsible for a locally-relevant and responsive curriculum.
- Be seen as a powerful tool for individual reflection and meaning making, contributing to the teacher’s professional identity, resilience and commitment’ (p.134).

Brooks considers teachers to be working in professional knowledge landscapes where a professional compass is needed to assist in navigation through these landscapes.

The book is divided into two parts, following a general introduction setting the teacher in a contemporary context. Part 1 looks at knowledge landscapes and teacher identity and contains 3 chapters. The first of these, Chapter 2, looks at the contexts within which teachers operate, while Chapter 3 looks at the teacher’s relationship with their academic discipline. Chapter 4 considers teacher identity in the context of a range of secondary subjects along with a brief consideration of the primary phase. The parallels between History and Geography teaching are striking in her theoretical discussion. Chapter 4 is underpinned by a thorough grasp of educational theory and an interesting discussion of pedagogical content knowledge and Bernstein’s notion of the ‘pedagogic device’.

Part 2 is titled ‘Narratives of professional practice’ and contains 5 chapters. Chapter 5 discusses subject stories and teacher identities, focusing on three different geography teachers with distinctive, but interconnecting stories of their engagement with both geography and teaching in the classroom. The narrative makes an effective attempt to get to the essence of what makes a Geography teacher tick. Indeed, having read the stories of Paul, Nicola and Isobel, I found myself reflecting on my own subject story and its interplay with my academic career. As such this section of the book is extremely thought-provoking. Chapter 6 investigates the interplay between school cultures and subject stories through the contrasting examples of Mandy and Daisy, where one teacher is operating largely in harmony with the prevailing culture of the school, while the other is experiencing significant difficulties as a result of inherent clashes between her own belief as to what constitutes good Geography and the overall policies of the school which, to her, mitigate against the development of an effective subject curriculum. In chapter 7, Brooks discusses the example of Andrew, a relatively new teacher, teaching in the school where he was a pupil. Here, the issues relate to ongoing changes in the nature of the school (it has converted to an academy from a traditional grammar school) and how Andrew addresses

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these changes within the context of his own understanding of what is required to be an effective Geography teacher within a school with which he has long-standing connections. In chapter 8, the issue of subject identity is addressed through the story of Dan who retains a consistent subject story even though he changes from teaching in mainstream secondary education to teaching in a sixth form college. Here Brooks argues that ‘a teacher’s subject story can play a key part in professional identity, bringing coherence to professional practice’ (p.116).

Chapter 9 draws together the threads of the earlier arguments to make a clear case for teachers having a greater awareness of their own ‘professional compass.’

For the geography educator, the differences between the teachers’ stories are perhaps the most interesting elements. At one extreme, Dan (pp.116-125) cites the strong influence of Denis Cosgrove and his work on cultural Geography during his undergraduate years as a key determinant of how he would approach the subject as a teacher. In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that Dan has moved into post-16 education from secondary education. A strong desire to teach what he considers to be effective and interesting Geography permeates his approach to the subject. On the other hand, Mandy (pp.83-89), although she trained as a Geography teacher, expressed a clear preference for an integrated approach to the Humanities based on her own undergraduate background and a strongly expressed interest in issues of social justice. In the case of Paul (pp.65-71), we see how a central focus on place (as defined by Paul) enabled him to sustain an enthusiasm and passion for teaching throughout his career, seemingly regardless of any externally imposed curriculum changes which he was able to navigate to his satisfaction in the classroom.

It is not only through the lens of the subject that Brooks interrogates issues of teacher identity. Change within the school is also considered in a range of contexts, and while many of the strategies developed by the teachers are unsurprising, the consideration of how subject identity is central to teacher response provides considerable food for thought.

Throughout the vignettes of the six teachers that are discussed here, there is a clear correlation between how they see themselves as Geographers and how they see themselves as teachers. As such the book provides a link which is often missing when discussing the relationship between the academic discipline and the school subject.

Brooks makes clear the importance of a subject story and an effective Geographical narrative for the teacher. ‘Having a detailed understanding, through the lens of a discipline, changes how one views and values the world and undoubtedly in the case of teachers will affect how they teach about it’ (p.130). In a subsequent, related article (Brooks, 2017)

makes these ideas explicit in relation to initial teacher education (ITE), arguing that ITE should equip teachers with the tools:

- to understand and develop their own story in relation to their subject, and how this translates into their practice
- to develop a critical eye for the values expressed explicitly and implicitly by their school contexts and how this relates to their own values
- to explore mechanisms to ensure that their subject story is nourished, grows through their professional career and does not get drowned out by the competing sacred stories told within their professional contexts' (Brooks, 2017, p.50).

She concludes: 'The role of ITE is not just to equip geography teachers with the skills they need to teach students, but also to enable them to nurture their professional compass to help them adapt and develop their professional practice throughout their careers'(Brooks, 2017, 50).

As such, this is a thought-provoking book which will, hopefully, lead to greater consideration being given to the essential links between the way teachers see themselves as subject specialists and how this subject narrative plays out in the complex arena of school and classroom settings throughout the career of the teacher.

### **Reference**

Brooks, C (2017) Pedagogy and identity in initial teacher education: developing a 'professional compass', *Geography*, 102, 1, pp.44-50.