

**KER07373**

**Teaching in a place: Locating teacher identity**

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## Abstract

*To be in a place is not just to be situated somewhere, but to participate in a set of social relations and representations of place that profoundly influence who we see ourselves to be, and how we belong. In this paper I draw on interview data from my doctoral study "Teachers in their place: teachers at work in an environmental communications project" to consider the ways in which one early career teacher's history, biography and everyday life interact with teacher identity and professional practice. Using a combination of aspects of narrative and discourse analysis of her place stories produces an account not only of moments of simultaneously expressed multiple stances but an emergent understanding of place as a significant dimension of teacher identity.*

*I suggest that the complicated relations between identities, places and pedagogy draw attention to the importance of place as a significant dimension of both teacher identity and pedagogical practice.*

## Introduction

This paper emerges from a PhD study that examines the ways in which teachers' place(d) histories, biographies and everyday lives interact with teacher identity and professional practice. The professional practice in this study is specifically the work that the teachers undertake in relation to *Special Forever*. *Special Forever* is an environmental communications and professional learning project that began in 1993 as a collaborative educative venture between the Primary English Teaching Association (PETA) and The Murray-Darling Basin Commission. It is designed to enhance primary school children's literacy and their knowledge about the Murray-Darling Basin, an extensive catchment area covering much of inland south-eastern Australia. There are 22 Special Forever regions in the Murray-Darling Basin, each one having a regional coordinator who volunteers time to encourage schools in the region to participate in the project, to alert schools to *Special Forever* resources and units of work that are available online, and, to manage the regional selection of children's artwork and writing for a high quality annual anthology published by PETA.

Teachers participating in *Special Forever* typically explore social, cultural and emotional aspects of local places with their students, and invite them to write a range of poetry and expressive writing. Some design curriculum units that focus on endangered species and ecosystems, local and Basin-wide. Many have developed strong relationships with local community groups such as Water Watch, Salt Watch, Land Care, and Bird Watchers and have initiated projects that actively involve parents and school communities in a range of ways. These different emphases in *Special Forever* reflect its historical shifts from a subject English-oriented "writing project" to a more ecologically oriented "environmental communications"; from appreciation of children's "special places" to more critical knowledges of the environment and social action in and with local communities. (Cormack and Green, 2007; Reid, 2007.)

My study focuses on five of the 22 teachers. Four of these teachers have been involved in *Special Forever* for over a decade. During interviews for a related ARC project<sup>1</sup>, their obvious

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<sup>1</sup> The study *Literacy and the environment: A situated study of multi-mediated literacy, sustainability, local knowledges and educational change* is a collaborative research project (no. LP0455537) between the Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia, Charles Sturt University, and Industry Partner The Primary English Teaching Association. Chief Investigators are Phil Cormack, Barbara

commitment and passion for their environmental communications work, and their talk about the effects of *Special Forever* on their professional identities and pedagogical practice, inspired some researcherly wonderings on my part and became the impetus for my study. The teachers who agreed to be interviewed for my project spoke about long-term generational connections to the region in which they are currently teaching, complex orientations to environmental issues, their openness to designing technology-infused environmental communications curriculum, and their relatively long term appointments to their school. They are, however, quite distinctive in the ways in which they place themselves and how they manage competing and sometimes contradictory positions as teachers, users of Murray-Darling Basin resources, farmers, and activists. The fifth teacher, Sophie, is the focus for this paper. In her early thirties, she is an early career teacher who has been a *Special Forever* coordinator for three years, and has not only 'been places' but sees herself as 'going places'. A deep connection with particular places features in her biography, as does mobility and transition. There are discernible threads through her stories of places that become woven into her teacher identity and powerfully shape her pedagogies as an environmental communications teacher, suggesting that an investigation of the links between place and teacher identity will contribute to thinking anew about what it means to be a teacher in a particular place, at a particular time.

The ways in which place and places feature in teachers' identities and pedagogies is an organising theme for this paper. I begin with a brief discussion of place theory to highlight the key ideas that are informing my approach to the question of teachers' placed identities. I then comment on two strands of place literature that I use to connect place, space and teacher identity. In the second part of the paper I present an analysis of selected interview data, focusing on Sophie's narratives of places and teacher identities. I conclude with some comments about why place matters to this teacher and what we might learn from attending to 'the spatial' dimension of teacher identity.

### **Place and spatiality**

The question "What is place?" has been the subject of scholarship and debate in many different disciplinary fields, including geography, anthropology, cultural studies, philosophy, and environmental studies. The diversity of responses to this question is captured in Buell's (2005: 63) comment that "the concept of place ... gestures in at least three directions at once – toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual (and, I would add, 'collective') affect or bond". Each of these 'directions' represents different approaches to explaining and understanding the ways in which human beings inhabit space socially, the ways in which human beings are place makers. Each has some bearing on the concept of place that shapes this study.

#### *The social construction of place - spatiality*

For the most part, place is taken for granted as we engage in the social practices of everyday life. We live in, work in, and travel between and across places as a matter of course. Place, if it is thought of at all, is typically just the background for social activity. Yet the question "Where do you come from?" can generate any number of responses. We might mention a continent, country or state, but might also describe a neighbourhood, a suburb, or a town – its housing, streetscapes, private and public spaces, perhaps its desirability or elements of its history. Such responses already intimate multiple layers of meaning of places, that they are something more than a mere geographic location. Places, as Kostogriz (2006) notes, are also

particular social spaces, shaped by social forces within and beyond the imagined boundaries of any particular place. Massey (1994: 168) explains it this way:

Social relations always have a spatial form and spatial content. They exist, necessarily, both *in* space (i.e. in a locational relation to other social phenomena) and *across* space. And it is the vast complexity of interlocking and articulating nets of social relations which is social space. Given that conception of space, a 'place' is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location.

Our social lives, then, unfold in material environments, and in places that are socially constructed. Utilising this spatial dimension of social relations in places (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006) enables us to (re)consider the role that places play in the identity work that teachers do, and provides an opening for exploring the ways in which *where* we are is inextricably bound up in *who* we are (Orr, 1992). This '*where* we are' is also a matter of representation, a point I address in passing and take up later in the discussion of Sophie's relationships with places.

#### *Place as a site of representation*

In my study I am interested in how the teachers represent places that are, or have been, important in their histories, and how place enters into their environmental communications curriculum. The teachers represent places in mappings, images and words; they speak about places from different discursive vantage points, distinguish places from each other and construct relations between them. In other words, while place making is material as suggested above, place is also what we make of it symbolically – a matter of imagination and representation.

#### *Place and the environment*

The teachers who have participated in the study on which this paper is based embrace the sometimes problematic experience of being human in connection with the world of nature, and take seriously a responsibility to actively work towards restoring damaged environments and conserving natural resources for future generations. Almost inevitably there are hints that their stance to the environment constructs a binary opposition between nature and culture. Without digressing into the debate, I simply signal that this is a critical tension in teaching in, for, and about the environment. As Malouf (1998, p. 44-45) points out, nature and culture are already *in* place. He observes that

landscape is ... a work of 'culture' in both senses of the word ... We remake the land in our own image so that it comes in time to reflect both the industry and the imagination of its makers, and gives us back, in working land, but also in the idealised version of landscape that is park or garden, an image both of our human nature and our power.

This is not to suggest that it is impossible to experience a place that is relatively untouched by human activities, but to acknowledge that everywhere there are marks of habitation, of changes made to the natural environment. Humans are deeply implicated in this process of (in)scribing landscapes (Davies, 2000) and the environment, with the consequence that in attending to the ecological well-being of places we unavoidably engage in moral and political struggles.

#### **Place, space and teacher identity**

There are two strands of the place literature that are relevant to a study of the intersections of space, place and teacher identity at a time when the impact of human activities on the environment presses ever urgently on the public conscience and on government's environmental management decisions. One strand is concerned with eco-ethical place responsiveness (Cameron, 2003 and 2004; Gruenewald, 2003a; Orr, 1992; Plumwood, 2003; Rose, 2005). Eco-ethical place responsiveness explores the ways in which people might re-

engage with place as ecologically informed citizens. It draws on both a phenomenological tradition and critical environmental education. These approaches are reflected in the pedagogies of *Special Forever* teachers: they embrace the proposition that it is important to know a place deeply and sensually, to experience the natural world, before an ethic of care can be nurtured; they also work from the principle that 'caring' is a collective activity with political and social consequences.

Another strand, the emerging literature that takes account of the spatial dimension of identity (Bentham and Stokoe, 2006; Massey, 1994; Rose, 2002), has begun to filter into research in education (eg. Kostogriz, 2006; McConaghy, 2006; McLeod and Dillabough, 2007). A key proposition – that places comprise the social space and, at the same time, are constituted within it (Kostogriz, 2006: 177) – has generated important insights about the material effects of spatiality and location for teachers, teaching, and students. Place is reconceptualized as unfinished, in a process of constant change, repair and contestation as people move, settle and resettle. Feminist geographers have contributed significantly to this reconceptualization of place. For example, McDowell (1999: 7) points out that:

social practices, including the wide range of social interactions at a variety of sites and places ... and ways of thinking about and representing place are interconnected and mutually constituted. We all act in relation to our intentions and beliefs, which are always culturally shaped and historically and spatially positioned.

These ideas have been instrumental in shaping my thinking about place, and I use the term to refer to both environmental materiality and place as an instantiation of social space, a complex tangle of gendered, classed and raced social markers. This expanded concept of place shapes my reading of the spatial dimensions of teachers' narratives of identity.

### **Interview Data and Analysis**

The teachers I interviewed live in two states (Victoria and New South Wales) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). This was somewhat of a constraint on possibilities for face-to-face interviews so after the first interview, which was organised to coincide with a two-day professional learning event in Sydney, the interviews were conducted by telephone and not where the teachers actually live and teach. My 'not-being-there' is potentially problematic for a study interested in 'teachers in a place', however, the teachers' representations of place are most significant for this study. These representations include the map each teacher drew in the first interview, photographs they took of 'their place', and several short reflective written pieces about the places in which they engaged in their everyday social practices.

The cycle of four interviews generated narratives about places where each teacher grew up, their teaching history and how they came to be teachers in the particular place where they now work, as well as their experiences of the place in which they currently live. The interviews also explored how the teachers negotiated discursive boundaries and different subject positions as teachers, farmers, landowners and users of water and other resources of the Murray-Darling Basin. This record of lived places and spaces produced aspects of the histories of their subjectivities as well as the social and cultural dimensions associated with being in a particular place.

The interviews are a rich source of storied teacher selves that illustrate the ways in which teacher identities articulate with their place(d) histories and biographies. Their place identities and practices thread through their 'place-based pedagogies' (Cameron 2003; Gruenewald 2003 a, 2003b; Smith, 2002). How teacher identity and other identities come together and pull against each other is most visible in the discussions about what goes on in the design and practice of their environmental communications curriculum, particularly around local environmental issues.

The interview analysis included content analysis, identification of discourses through which teachers speak their narratives of place and identity, and close readings of selected narratives using systemic functional linguistics. A focus on sections of interview transcripts in which an account of a particular memory, or incident, or event represents a 'narrative with a point' (Johnstone, 2001, cited in Watson 2006, p. 513) suggested intertwining threads in the fabric of teacher identity. The main analytical concepts are closely connected to the place theory discussed earlier and attend to the place(d) identities constructed through the teacher narratives.

For my purposes here I concentrate on the narratives that Sophie recounts which suggest different identities and stances to place and the environment, and consider the mutual shaping of her teacher and other identities through her place pedagogy.

### **Place(d) identities, practices and pedagogy**

Sophie's narratives are about 'being somewhere', unfolding her identities that are contingent on, and embodied in, particular places and spaces. A snapshot of places included in her biography hints at the ways in which she experiences places as saturated with social relations, and always connected with their relation to, and comparison with, other places.

#### *Places past and present: a short biography*

Sophie locates places on her map in relation to state boundaries and describes herself as a "Burra girl, just across the border". She speaks about the 40-acre property near Clunes where she spent her childhood. A narrative of rich-to-poor in the recession that hit in the 1990s tells of the family's move from Clunes to Canberra and then to Burra where they bought another 40-acre property. At this time she went from a small private school (360 students) in the country to a large secondary college (2,000 students) in Canberra for years 11 and 12. She didn't finish year 12. She spent three years in Melbourne and worked in child care before returning to Canberra to undertake her under-graduate teaching degree.

While her trajectory through these places suggests a certain mobility she nevertheless constructs her identities as significantly placed. She did not work in a bar, for example, but worked in Queanbeyan in a bar. Many descriptions of places where she has lived and worked are inflected with class distinctions: "a bit of a rough town ... a strange sort of red-neck town"; "a struggle town ... it's amazing, sort of like the dregs of Canberra ... I love going there, but it's a different place and it's got a bad reputation". Her accounts of places signal relationships between and across places. Some of these places, like Queanbeyan, are less desirable than others; some, like Canberra, are more prestigious. Traces of experiences of these places articulate with her dis-identification of 'being rich'. One example is related to socialising in the "best pubs and beautiful restaurants ... 'Yuppie' is the word that comes to mind, but not in my case!"

Other places are spoken about from different discursive positions. Local and secluded places are represented as 'nature', an opportunity for repose and an escape from the social; in coastal places Sophie is a tourist, looking at and passing through places, enjoying the pleasures they afford. She is also struck by the aesthetics of the environment around Canberra:

I love like how it's surrounded by the Brindabellas, you know, that's just such a beautiful thing to see, and every morning when I drive to school I look at, you can see, the mountains and they've got snow on them, or they're burnt from the bushfires, yeah, they're quite amazing.

Her identity is invested in different discourses and representations of places, a complex layering of pasts and presents.

Of particular interest for this paper are Sophie's narratives of a childhood lived on farms and the continuities of place identity and place practices that are immanent in her teacher identity and teaching practice. I turn now to a discussion of Sophie's place pedagogy and begin with an observation of her environmental communications curriculum in action. It is indicative of her pedagogical practice of working in and on the environment. I then trace some of the threads that emerge through the four interviews and her reflective writing to show that this place pedagogy is connected to the history of her place(d) identities.

#### *Place pedagogy and identity work*

At the heart of Sophie's environmental communications curriculum is active work on a local environmental problem and a long-term commitment to expanding students' knowledge *about* their place, *in* their place (after McConaghy, 2006, p. 331). For most of the school year (April to November) Sophie regularly walks her class of 8 and 9-year-olds up to the Ridge, digging tools and digital camera in hand. The walk is quite steep in parts; sometimes the heat and the dust can make the trek arduous, but there are rarely complaints. Guided by a Land Care volunteer who accompanies them, they decide which area to work on, and the children begin their labour: pulling out *Verbascum*, an invasive weed that has a stranglehold on parts of the Ridge. As the children work, they notice other weeds, small lizards, insects, and indigenous plants ... and learn their names. They ask Sophie to photograph the specimens that have caught their attention. As the children weed she photographs the area and keeps a visual record of the impact of their efforts over time. She reflects on the ongoing-ness of the project:

... it's not really that much fun going up there, like I mean it is for the first few times, but it's hard work, and it's dry, and it's, you know, it's pretty dusty, and you sort of think "Oh, I can't be bothered", but it's when you get back, and the kids are the same, that it's when we get back to school and, you know, when other people sort of say "Wow, you've done such a good job up there."

Sophie describes this 'hands-on' as an important part of her environmental communications unit:

... the hands-on ... ended up being, you know, the major, well the really fun part as well as the more incidental learning took place when we were up on the Ridge, actually doing the work ... so even though we were just pulling out weeds, which is not really that hard, or you need intelligence to do it or anything, but that actually getting out there and working in the environment was probably the major part of the program ...

Productive labour and the practice of working in and on the environment constitute one continuity through her narratives. Her description of experiences of the farm where she grew up evokes this kind of work and embodiment:

I mean I've definitely loved being outdoors, like just a farm kid at heart, always will be, I love getting my hands dirty and being outside with nature ...

The practices she associates with this childhood place – caring for the horses and "cleaning out their muck", working and walking "in the mud", being *in* the environment – are echoed in her teaching practices. In the process of engaging in restorative work, getting *their* hands dirty and actively re-making this place by erasing the *Verbascum*, the children become observant of where they are, and come to know some of the details of the Ridge habitat *in situ*. Outside school, they talk about the project with their families, teaching them what they have learned and taking them to the Ridge on the weekends.

There are parallels here with Sophie's own learning about the place where she currently lives. Her increasing knowledge of the local environment has "really shifted [her] understanding" and has prompted her to "speak up" for the environment:

... looking at the woodland in Canberra and valuing it a lot more ... it's a really important endangered sort of habitat. But people don't even know about, you know, there's one butterfly in Canberra that eats this one thing in Canberra, and if it goes then it's gone, and people would never even know that you see – I tell them!

Learning about and teaching in the local has made Sophie much more aware of the fragility and uniqueness of the place in which she lives. What she learns through her teaching spills over into personal relationships and social talk, and she repositions herself as an advocate for environmental awareness amongst her peers. Taking a more overt activist stance produces a tension and ambiguity around her desire to be a good environmental communications teacher and positive model for her students. In a self-reflexive moment Sophie makes problematic her love of horse riding:

I've always ridden horses and I've always loved being outside, but ... riding horses isn't being very environmental because they wreck the land which, you know, to be really caring about it, it's obvious ... it's [*Special Forever*] made me much more aware ... it definitely makes me stop and think and, you know, think about ... as a teacher how important my job is there.

This shaping of teacher (and other) identities through her place pedagogy reflects the serious work Sophie undertakes as an active environmental teacher. She learns alongside the children and hopes that, like her, they will become more attuned to who they are and where they are. Her place pedagogy takes the children beyond appreciation of their 'special place' and complicates the notion of 'care for the environment' that is commonly provided for young children: they learn about the impact of human activity on the environment and its positive and negative effects, and their own complex role in the ecosystem. She engages them in cooperative physical work on the Ridge as described earlier; she encourages intellectual engagement through close observation of plants and insects, and learning of scientific names and classification systems. In the classroom she helps them to use web resources to build on their knowledge of local species and ecologies. She has re-imagined relationships with the environment in order to engender an ethic of care that is grounded in an active sensing and deep knowing of place.

The substantial knowledge about plants that the project at the Ridge has generated has been used to design a drought-resistant garden at the school. Sophie reflects on the work at the Ridge and the children's responsibility and care for this 'new project':

I think they feel really, like custodians and carers ... they just sort of feel like they're responsible for it, and the drought-resistant garden is going really well at school, and that too, that's a good project because it's filtered through the whole school ... year 4s know how to work the system, the pumps, the taps and everything, so they're sort of leaders which, yeah, I think that's how they feel. They feel like leaders ... you'd just be amazed at how much local knowledge they have because we've been up there – or how much environmental knowledge they have, even though it's quite specific and local, but it's still, yeah it's really just put them on a different level than other kids.

Sophie foregrounds the 'knowing' and 'feeling' embodied in their shared experience of the Ridge. The children readily assume leadership roles; they stand out because their experience of 'being there' has been, and continues to be, significant for their learning and knowing more intimately the place where they labour. She positions them as researchers, knowers and activists. In using "custodians" and "carers" as explanatory categories, she appropriates the rhetoric of *Special Forever* and embraces the possibilities for students to become self-activating carers for their environment, and informed eco-citizens.

The environmental knowledge that the children develop is "quite specific and local", emerging from the particularity of the Ridge. Characteristic of ecological place-based education

(Gruenewald 2003a, p. 7; Smith 2002, pp. 593-594), it is also multidisciplinary, inherently experiential, and connects place, self and community in significant ways. Sophie's place pedagogy evokes place as pedagogical. As (Gruenewald 2003b, p. 621) writes, "as centres of experiences, places *teach* us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy". This involves "[l]earning to listen to what place is telling us" (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 645). Sophie's place pedagogy has attuned her students, and herself, to listen to what one particular place has to tell.

*Future places: a short reflection*

Sophie is about to begin a new phase of her life as a young married woman and mother, temporarily leaving teaching to run a small business alongside her husband. She loves the coast and has always "dreamed of teaching at the beach and taking the kids down to the ocean, studying and that sort of thing." Her teacher identity emerges here, shaping her personal life as much as her personal life shapes her decisions about her career. More interesting though is that while she is moving on, she holds onto the importance of place and the local as a resource for learning not just about ecologies and geographies in place, but knowing 'where and who we are'. This is captured in a reflective piece Sophie writes about the Ridge and the accomplishments of the children over the last 12 months, and in which she imagines a future as a teacher in another place:

*As I walk up the steep hill to Cooleman Ridge I feel my heart pounding and I think 'Is this really worth it?' I see my class of 30 students easily making the climb. Then one of them says "I wonder if we will see that Wedge Tailed Eagle again" and I know the walk is worth it.*

*The landscape is grassy and dry of course. Some areas of the ridge are beautiful, full of native flora and fauna; these are the areas we have been caring for. Some areas are horrid - filled with blackberries and Verbascum.*

*I feel so proud as I walk along the path. Our school has been making a difference here for over 20 years. I wonder who will continue the work next year when I have gone.*

*I hope my new school is near a nature reserve.*

Sophie's life history unfolds as a narrative of placed identities, and of multiple relationships with the places where she lives and teaches. She grapples with the contradictory positions that she finds herself in as she comes to know place more intimately, and is open to flows of pedagogical and place practices that shape her as an ethically nuanced teacher.

**Place and teacher identity**

Elbaz-Luwisch (2004, p. 388) writes that what is missing in the research literature on teacher identity is "a sense of the teacher teaching in a *place* – a given location that is not only specific, describable and distinct from other locations, but that holds meaning, that matters to the persons who inhabit it". The interviews with Sophie have generated many narratives about what it is like to be a teacher in a particular place, a place that matters to her. Like the other teachers in my study, she is also aware of the environmental and social cost of people *not knowing* where they are:

*I'm still just learning so much, I hadn't even heard of this word 'Murray-Darling Basin' – it's pathetic, isn't it – until I started *Special Forever*. I probably only heard it, you know, mentioned in the background or ... it's never been brought to my attention that I actually live in this place that produces 90% of our food and, you know, it's weird, and I'm sure a lot of people are like how I used to be ...*

Sophie's recognition of place in this moment constitutes her as a moral subject, a teacher who is mindful of the place within the Murray-Darling Basin that she and the children are

learning to 'reinhabit' (Gruenewald, 2003b; Orr, 1992). It is a salutary reminder that the material places and discursive spaces in which teachers and their students explore complex relations between identities and places, belonging and knowing, matter.

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