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Geography teacher educators' identity, roles and professional learning in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world

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ABSTRACT

Globally, teacher educators work in contexts which are shaped and informed by persistent policy reform and global environmental crises which we argue, combine to create a professional life that is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA). Through a case study of geography teacher educators (GTEs) based in England, we explore the experiences, knowledge and professional growth of teacher educators. Our findings draw on data from responses to an online questionnaire (n=51), a practitioner workshop and 11 semi-structured interviews. We find that GTEs have multi-faceted identities which are shaped by professional, social and personal realms through engagement with a diverse community of practice. The VUCA context of teacher education is visible in the professional identities of GTEs in both affirming and deleterious ways which we argue, are linked to perceptions of professional autonomy. We argue that the professional role of teacher educators is to bravely engage with policy making as part of their contribution to a socially and environmentally just future for all.

KEYWORDS

Communities of practice; geography teacher educators; identity; initial teacher educator (ITE); professional learning; teacher education

Introduction

Initial teacher education (ITE) systems worldwide have long been the subject of significant government review and reform driven by the development of neoliberal discourses, policies and practices across the sector (Furlong, 2013). This “policy turn” in ITE (Cochran-Smith, 2016) has resulted in a complex, fragmented and challenging context for teacher educators, with an increase in centralised curricular and “school-led” provision justified by a focus on accountability and professional standards (Alexander & Bourke, 2021; Mutton, Burn, & Menter, 2017). Increased centralisation and narrowing of ITE curricular, justified with the aim of increasing the quality of ITE, is visible in government-led reforms across the world including

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in Australia (Alexander & Bourke, 2021), England (Ellis et al., 2019; Mutton, Burn, Thompson, & Childs, 2021) and the USA (Fuller & Stevenson, 2018). Critics of this approach to ITE have argued that these reforms de-professionalise teachers and allow the continued reproduction of social inequalities (Dwyer, Willis, & Call, 2020). Beyond the complex policy landscape of ITE which shapes the professional lives of teacher educators in some parts of the globe, is the wider context of social and environmental injustice. Education has been recognised as having a key role in creating a socially just and sustainable world (Pike, 2021; UN, 2021). In November 2021, the United Nations Climate Change Conference closed with specific commitments from Education and Environment ministers, including integrating climate change and sustainability into teacher education. The contribution and identities of teachers, especially geography teachers, to the teaching of climate change and sustainability in formal education has been widely recognised (Rushton, 2021). However, the important context of teacher education, and geography teacher educators, have received less research attention indeed, the concepts of social justice or sustainability are not currently visible in teacher education policy in England (DfE, 2019a, 2019b; Dunlop & Rushton, 2022). This study seeks to address this gap and explores the professional identity and professional learning of school-based and university-based geography teacher educators, through a subject lens. As well as contributing to the arguably under-researched area of geography teacher educator identities, this study will also go some way to address the methodological concerns of Boyd, Murray, and White (2021) that much research in this area is self-study practitioner research. We used a mixed methods approach, including data gathered from a questionnaire (n=51), workshop and interviews (n=11) all of which took place online. The aim of this research is to explore who geography teacher educators are, what they do and how they learn, so we can better understand the support needs of practitioners working in different contexts. Our guiding research question is: How do geography teacher educators articulate and negotiate their identities and practice?

Literature review

Teacher educators, their work, identity and professional needs

There is a considerable international body of scholarly work on teacher educators, with a focus on who they are, what they do and how they learn (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ping, Schellings, & Beijgaard, 2018; Cochran-Smith, Grudnoff, Orland-Barak, & Smith, 2020). Some of this research draws on Beijgaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) framework of professional identity, that comprises four features: (1) it is dynamic and evolving, (2) it involves a person and context, (3) is made up of sub-identities and, (4) is actively constructed through professional development and learning. In a systematic review of teacher educators' professional learning, Ping et al. (2018) found that professional learning was valued, took many forms and supported teacher educators to adjust to a new way of working and culture while taking a research-based approach to teaching adults. Effective forms of professional learning are identified as academic engagement and research, formal education, and social and professional interactions; these activities were also found to support identity development. The

sub-identities of teacher educators are shaped by many factors including their subject specialism, engagement with research and career stage (Izadinia, 2014; Loughran, 2014). In the case of geography, there is limited research on geography teacher and teacher educator identities. What is currently available recognises that subject expertise, beliefs and values all influence how geographers see themselves (for example: Brooks, 2016; Seow, 2016; Lee, 2020; Till, 2020; Rushton, 2021). Recent attention to knowledge and more specifically the notion of powerful knowledge (Young, 2008) within geography education across all stages of education (see for example Maude, 2020) requires more considered professional development on research, theory and models to support teacher educators and pre-service teachers to critically engage with issues of knowledge production, recontextualisation and enactment in school (Healy, 2021).

The international literature and policy recognise the role of teacher educators in maintaining teacher quality and pupil outcomes (Ataş, Daloğlu, & Hildén, 2021; Eurydice, 2017; DfE, 2022a). In England, their status is on a par with teachers as there are no requirements to complete additional qualifications before transitioning from teaching children and young people in schools to working as a teacher educator. Yet, the role is complex and requires a depth of knowledge and skills to be a teacher of teachers, coach, researcher, curriculum developer, gatekeeper and broker (Lunenberg, Dengerink, & Korthagen, 2014). No matter what their subject-specialism, in England, there are no centralised ITE curricula or guidelines available informing teacher educators how to carry out their role or what a strategic professional development (PD) plan looks like (Boyd et al., 2021). Consequently, support for new teacher educators will need to be individualised according to their prior experience, role and context (Murray, 2016). In some research-intensive universities there is an expectation that teacher educators hold a doctorate and a research disposition to enhance teaching, secure research funding and conduct research (MacPhail, 2021; Smith & Flores, 2019). Consequently, much of the literature on being and becoming a teacher educator is from the perspective of those who work in a university, rather than a school, and require a research profile for career development and promotion (Izadinia, 2014; Czerniawski, MacPhail, & Guberman, 2017; MacPhail, 2021).

Teacher educators in the context of England, UK

Teacher educators in England currently work in what has been described as a “complex policy landscape” (Mutton et al., 2021, p.51), where a focus of change has been to expand and diversify the number of routes into teaching. This has created more school-led, training-focused routes, in a move away from a model of teacher education partnership between universities and schools, and towards schools as the dominant context for initial teacher education and teacher educators (DfE, 2022b). This policy-turn away from university-based teacher education (and teacher educators) can also be seen in the language used by policy makers to describe the professional preparation of teachers: the preferred term in England since at least 2010 has been Initial Teacher Training (ITT) as opposed to initial teacher education (ITE). The predominant use of ITT can be traced back to the schools *White Paper*

(DfE, 2010, p. 9) which called for ITT reform “to increase the proportion of time trainees spend in the classroom” and underlined an emphasis on *training* teachers through a model of apprenticeship rather than *education* which brings theory, research and practice together (Mutton et al., 2017).

In 2019, two further teacher education policies were published: the Early Career Framework (ECF) (DfE, 2019a) which increased the period of induction for teacher from one to two years, and the Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Training (CCF) (DfE, 2019b) which continued the prescription of the content of teacher education programmes. The requirement for teacher educators to deliver a curriculum that has the Core Content Framework at the centre was further underlined by a new inspection framework for ITE (Ofsted, 2020) and the inspectorate’s report into the impact of COVID-19 on the sector (Ofsted, 2021). Further change has included the government’s Initial Teacher Training Market Review (DfE, 2021) which includes the requirement for all teacher education providers to go through a process of reaccreditation to ensure they demonstrate their capability to implement the Core Content Framework. The Market Review has been met with substantial opposition across the sector (DfE, 2021; UCET, 2021), with leading higher education institutions, including the University of Cambridge considering withdrawing from teacher education (e.g. Virgo & Robertson, 2021). Arguably, the Core Content Framework and the Early Career Framework, combined with the Market Review of Initial Teacher Training are mechanisms which continue the prescription of teacher education and teacher educators across England. This provides a challenging context for the role and professional development of teacher educators, and this is a context which is replicated internationally including Australia (Alexander & Bourke, 2021) and the United States (Fuller & Stevenson, 2018). Therefore, findings from this case study of geography teacher educators in England will likely have relevance and value to teacher education at an international level.

Methodology

Our aim through this research is to understand the professional lives of geography teacher educators with the overarching research question: how do geography teacher educators articulate and negotiate their identities and practice? Our research draws on the analysis of 51 responses to an online questionnaire, a practitioner workshop and 11 semi-structured interviews with geography teacher educators, as we outline below. In drawing on rich, qualitative data through these varied approaches and on our own experiences as GTEs, the understandings that we construct through this research are enriched by our own professional knowledge (Fox, 2008) which is viewed as a complex analytical resource rather than limiting or diminishing knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Participants

The participants were 51 teacher educators; 26 school-based, 23 university-based and two working in other education contexts. Table 1 shows the qualification and

Table 1. Geography teacher educators' qualifications and context.

Role	First degree	Master's degree	Doctorate (PGR student)	Primary, secondary or post-16
University-based teacher educator	23	20	9 (2)	4 primary, 19 secondary
School-based teacher educator	26	14	3	1 primary, 21 secondary, 4 post-16
Other	2	2	1	1 secondary, 1 post-16
Total	51	36	13 (2)	

Table 2. Geography teacher educators' experience as a school teacher.

Years as a school teacher	School-based	University-based	Other	Total
0–5	7	2		9
6–10	2	5		7
11–15	6	7	1	14
16–20	5	6		11
21>	6	3	1	10
Total	26	23	2	51

Table 3. Geography teacher educators' experience as a teacher educator.

Years as a teacher educator	School-based	University-based	Other	Total
0–5	7	6	1	14
6–10	5	7		12
11–15	4	4		8
16–20	5	2		7
21>	5	4	1	10
Total	26	23	2	51

contexts in which the GTEs worked; all had experience as geography teachers in school prior to their involvement in ITE. [Tables 2](#) and [3](#) show the number of years of experience participants had as a schoolteacher and as a teacher educator. All GTEs held a first degree, and a significant proportion held a master's degrees (20/23 university-based, 14/26 school-based and 2/2 from other contexts). In addition, three school-based and nine university-based GTEs held a doctorate.

Data collection

Our data derives from three sources: (1) 51 responses to an online questionnaire; (2) perspectives shared via a workshop presentation of initial findings; and (3) semi-structured interviews with 11 geography teacher educators. Prior to data collection, we gained institutional ethics committee approval (14/7/2021, MRA-2021-25690). Drawing on the literature we developed an online questionnaire to elicit a broad range of data including academic qualifications, teaching experience, role, context and perspectives from geography teacher educators in a broad range of school, university and other contexts from across England. The survey was open for a calendar month from 11 November to 10 December 2021 and the link was shared using the Geography Teacher Educator Twitter, LinkedIn and WhatsApp accounts and the Geographical Association's Geography Teacher Educator Newsletter to raise awareness within this community of teacher educators. At the outset of the

questionnaire, participants were provided with information about the nature and purpose of the research study and asked to give informed consent. The survey was formed of two sections with predominantly open-ended questions giving participants the freedom to provide detailed responses. The first part focused on questions about the participants' role and context, whilst the second invited participants to share their opinions and experiences as geography teacher educators. At the close of the survey, participants were invited to complete an interview to further explore their perspectives.

Following an initial analysis of the questionnaire data, the authors shared early findings in a workshop-style presentation in January 2022, at the annual Geography Teacher Educators' online conference (Geographical Association, 2022). During the presentation, attended by 30 GTEs, participants were invited to discuss and share their responses which were captured through the authors notes and contributions to a *Padlet*. Both the responses to the online questionnaire and workshop informed the development of the subsequent interview schedule.

To further explore the themes of the study and information provided in the questionnaire, we conducted online semi-structured interviews with 11 GTEs, identified through responses to the survey or workshop during February and March 2022. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using *Microsoft Teams* built-in software which was thoroughly checked by the authors. As members of the GTE community, participants were able to provide rich and detailed understandings of the experiences of GTEs in England in both university and school settings and beyond these spaces. The discourse on which they drew overlapped across these different spaces and were situated in both personal and professional domains. During the interviews, each lasting approximately 30–40 minutes, participants were asked questions in five main areas: *background information*, including information about their subject and age-phase specialism and their experience as a teacher and a teacher educator; the *values* and *roles* that they hold; the *knowledge* that GTEs consider important; and the sources of *professional support and development* which they engage with. At the outset of each interview, we discussed issues around anonymity (participant contributions are shared in this research using pseudonyms) and confidentiality with participants in line with our ethical approval previously outlined.

Analytical process

Our analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke (2021) articulation of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) which has been described as a subjective, organic and reflexive method of data analysis, where researcher subjectivity is understood as a resource, rather than a barrier to knowledge production. In RTA, researchers actively interpret data and create new meaning through iterative and discursive phases of analysis rather than through the rigid application of a coding framework. These phases include: (1) data familiarisation; (2) coding the data set; (3) generation of initial themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing up the analytic narrative in the context of the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through these dynamic and reflective processes, researchers generate new

patterns of shared meaning founded upon a central concept or understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data familiarisation occurred during the data collection period through discussions of survey data, preparation for and reflection following the practitioner workshop and during the period of interview-based data collection. Both researchers wrote notes and summaries during the period of data collection and these notes enabled us to foreground our own subjectivities for example, our own experiences as geography teachers, geography teacher educators and members of geography teacher educator communities. Steps 2 to 5 of the RTA process involved frequent discussions between the researchers, often conducted via email, through online meetings and throughout the writing process which began prior to data collection as a way of developing a shared understanding of this research project and how each researcher situated it within the wider literature. For example, we shared our reflections and responses to the ways in which the literature concerning teacher educators foregrounded different frameworks including role, knowledge base and professional development (e.g. Ataş et al., 2021) and Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) and how these frameworks were present (or not) in the data. Therefore, our analysis was deductive (i.e. directed by existing ideas including theoretical framings from the literature and our own professional experiences), latent (i.e. reporting central concepts and understandings from the data) and situated within our own experiences and familiarity with the professional role of GTEs and wider GTE communities.

Limitations

Recognising the small sample size and the focus on England, we recognise that our findings are not generalisable across a diverse and international sector. In England, schools or universities rarely employ more than one geography teacher educator, therefore, the voices represented in this study speak from experiences drawn from across 51 educational institutions. We established trustworthiness through data and investigator triangulation and findings were triangulated across the questionnaire, interviews and workshop. Both authors worked together parallel across all phases of the study, including data collect and analysis to co-produce complementary results, as part of a credible study (Patton, 1999).

Findings

Roles of geography teacher educators

GTEs described the diverse nature of their role with three broad aspects including, (1) a focus on geography, (2) developing pre-service teachers' pedagogy, and (3) a pastoral role where they provide care to pre-service teachers during a challenging and intense period of professional transition and development. GTEs drew on both school and university contexts when sharing these three aspects. However, the first two strands of geography and pedagogy were foregrounded and interwoven by participants. For example, when describing their role as GTEs, participants frequently

placed emphasis on the subject specialist element of their work, seeing their role as supporting pre-service teachers to build their own relationship with geography, enhance their subject knowledge and, “grow and develop as a geographer and as a geography teacher” (P1) and to become “critically aware, agile and astute geographers” (P5). Sharing the value of geography as a versatile and relevant subject which has meaning beyond the context of the classroom was a common facet of GTEs articulation of their role and purpose, as one GTE reflected on their role with pre-service primary school geography teachers:

...my job is to say and show them this is really exciting at primary school, this is an opportunity for you to help children learn about the world around them and that is thrilling...my job is to...help them see that it's really valuable beyond just geography lessons...[including]....ideas about sustainability and caring for the world and...thinking about diversity and valuing diversity across the world in terms of environment and people and celebrating that... (P6)

GTEs described the prompt questions they iteratively asked themselves in their work including, “where’s the geography?” in their mentoring discussions with pre-service teachers or, “what geography have pupils learnt?” in their observation notes of lessons. Alongside this emphasis on geography, GTEs saw their role as supporting pre-service teachers to become thoughtful professionals engaged in an ongoing development of their pedagogy as one GTE put it, “thinkers and really good practitioners who never give up exploring what they want to do in terms of pedagogies, open-minded people” (P5). GTEs saw their role as extending support to a community of practice within geography education which encompassed pre-service teachers, school-based mentors and wider colleagues across school and university partnerships.

Knowledge base of geography teacher educators

Three broad areas of knowledge were articulated as core to the role of a GTE: (1) teaching school geography, (2) current, secure and substantive geographical knowledge and, (3) engagement with geography education. GTEs described the importance of needing “considerable” time in the school classroom teaching geography across “a range of schools” (P5, P8, P11). Through experience of teaching school geography and being a teacher educator, participants described how GTEs developed the ability to “critically analyse lessons” (P1), understand concepts of progression and assessment (P5) and curriculum development (P6). For some, roles that provided GTEs with a sense of the “bigger picture” of the work of schools, perhaps through the roles of Head of Department or governor, provided highly desirable knowledge and experience for GTEs (P9, P11). Coupled with the experience of teaching school geography, GTEs underlined the need substantive knowledge of geography and school geography (P5, P6, P7, P10) which some described as needing ongoing development, for example from textbooks and journal articles (P3). There was also a need for GTEs to engage with geography education, including developments in initial teacher education, so that GTEs continue to keep their knowledge current (P1, P8, P10, P11), including through reading pedagogically focused geography journals, such as those published by subject associations (P7).

Table 4. The knowledge geography teacher educators perceive as important (n=50).

Knowledge identified in the questionnaire	Frequency
Current disciplinary/subject knowledge	38
Pedagogical knowledge	17
Current school geography curriculum knowledge	12
Knowledge of schools and classrooms from a variety of contexts	9
Knowledge of the policy context of ITE, schools and universities	7
Refreshed knowledge through CPD/networking	5
Knowledge of leadership, mentoring and teacher growth	4
Education research knowledge	2

Table 5. The values geography teacher educators bring to their role (n=50).

Values identified in the questionnaire	Frequency
Care, compassion and kindness	14
Integrity, honesty and respect	13
Social justice, equality, tolerance, inclusivity	10
Passion and enthusiasm	10
Perseverance, resilience and commitment	10
Curiosity and love of geography	10
Intelligence, rigour and open-mindedness	7
Inspiring and empowering the next generation	7
Reflective practitioner	6

Knowledge of geography education was seen as especially important for GTEs as opposed to a school geography teacher (see Table 4), as GTEs emphasised the need for a broader and deeper understanding of teaching approaches (P1, P6), the ability to identify resources to support pedagogical development (P8, P10) and, to be able to bring together elements of research and practice (P7) as reflective practitioners (P1, P5). GTEs described the values that underpin the three broad areas of (1) teaching school geography, (2) geographical knowledge and, (3) geography education (see Table 5). These included GTEs view of the importance of the subject of geography, their desire to support the development of children and young people as independent and critical learners where all can contribute (P5, P11) and where learning evokes curiosity and a sense of wonder about the world (P6). Linked to these values of subject and learner was the concept of justice, associated to both ideas of equity and social justice (P3, P8) and, sustainability and environmental justice (P10, P11).

Professional learning challenges and opportunities

GTEs identified several forms of professional development (PD) as key to their professional growth, these included: (1) reading academic and professional literature, (2) professional learning within the GTE, school geography and wider education communities, (3) institutional activities around regulations and policy, assessment, programme development and quality assurance, and (4) research engagement. GTEs described a range of out-of-institution PD opportunities involving geography teacher and education networks (e.g. GTE, Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers and British Educational Research Association; P1, P9, P11), learned societies and associations (e.g. the Geographical Association and Royal Geographical Society; P4,

P7, P10), external examining (P10), consultancy work (P1, P3, P5), subject-specific CPD (P1, P2, P3, P5), writing for publication (P1, P8, P10) and research (P8, P11). The source of support for GTEs professional learning tended to be the wider GTE community. One participant thought it was important to draw on a range of people and sources of knowledge, they commented:

Professional learning should come from a variety of sources from beyond the confines of an individual school, which draw on the wider profession and various communities of practice - to allow debate and broaden understanding, as well as ideas (P8).

Another participant suggested that both peer and leadership support were necessary for successful implementation:

Professional learning must be embedded, ongoing and deliberate, supported by senior management, the best form is collaborative work with your peers or community of practice (P10).

When trying to meet specific needs such as embedding sustainability or decolonising the curriculum (P8, P11), GTEs described taking a serendipitous “scattergun approach” (P10) which was far less obvious and required knowing the relevant research and researchers and organisations (P4) (Table 6).

For some teacher education roles, holding a doctorate was an institutional expectation; P7 reflected on how this impacted their professional practice:

So, I started an EdD in 2014 and I still haven't finished. The Vice Chancellor at the time wanted every member of staff to have a doctorate, but they realize that staff don't finish. They've got a massive issue...and then COVID, we were all forced to pause... it's improved my practice...it made me think about research...and has had more of an impact than anything else.

GTEs described how barriers to PD stemmed from personal, organisational and policy constraints; and were more significant when two or more issues occurred concurrently. Limited time (P1, P8, P10, P11), competing demands (P2, P3, P7), cost (P1, P4, P6, P8) and lack of institutional support (P3, P5, P11) were the most significant barriers cited. When prioritising what work to do, research and reading were often side-lined to focus on teaching, marking, partnership relationship-building and administrative tasks. Commonly working “in silos” as the sole geography educator in their institutions (P10), GTEs valued engagement with literature and subject

Table 6. The professional learning geography teacher educators perceive as important.

Forms of professional learning identified in the questionnaire	Frequency (n = 50)
Reading	16
Geographical Association (events, networks & conference)	13
Online talks and webinars	12
The GTE community	11
Learning with other schoolteachers	7
University CPD	7
Research	6
Other learning communities	6
Twitter	6

communities to develop a shared understanding of issues and solutions (P7, P8), support the induction of new members of the community (P4), access different perspectives (P1) and when navigating new policy could take an evidence-informed approach with the aim of “delivering a really cracking geography course,” “without corrupting the curriculum” (P5, P10).

The identity of geography teacher educators

GTE identities were recognised to be complex and multi-faceted, influenced by their personal characteristics, education, experience and daily professional practice; GTEs self-identified as: (1) geography specialists, (2) as geography teachers (first-order practitioners) and, (3) teacher of geography teachers (second-order practitioners). GTEs discussed how their sub-identities were linked to their role as a reflective educator (P2, P7), scholarly practitioner (P8), education researcher (P7, P11), holistic educator (P5, P8), community builder and peer mentor (P7, P9, P10).

Participants recognised how their identity developed in response to professional practices, norms and expectations and were strongly influenced by workplace cultures. Experienced GTEs based in schools were seen to have a secure identity as a “geographer first,” then mentor (P2, P3). University-based GTEs held less secure identities, some proud of their role “in a bastion of learning” (P5), others felt they did not belong or qualify for the title of lecturer: “I still haven’t adjusted” (P4), “It took me a long time to feel I should be here...I don’t feel I’m an academic.” (P6). Another participant felt that teaching in a university was less respected by schoolteachers:

Almost the minute that you leave the classroom, you’re no longer thought of as a teacher by your colleagues...I found that super hard because I felt like I was still doing the work of a teacher just in a different way (P11).

This teacher identity decay was minimised when a new role, knowledge and skills were forged and students, colleagues, and the wider GTE community validated their work (P11). Having a doctorate enabled two participants to engage in research, create new knowledge and publish; validation from academia also supported their career progression in Higher Education. Tension between GTEs self-identity and the perceptions of others (e.g. the government, media and teaching profession) was evidence of their current insecurity; they were hopeful that their future selves were a better version (P5), with advanced qualifications (P2, P3, P7, P9), able to write for publication (P4, P8) and progress their career even if this meant leaving ITE (P1, P10, P11).

Discussion

This research draws on the context of teacher education in England as a case study of an international policy turn away from university-school partnership-based teacher education and towards centralised curricular and school-led training. It is in this context that we consider the ways GTEs articulate and negotiate their professional identities and practice. We argue that such an articulation and negotiation must also consider the wider global reality of social and environmental injustice and the

role of educators, including GTEs, to attend to climate change and sustainability education as part of their work with student teachers. Hadar, Ergas, Alpert, and Ariav (2020) have argued for a rethinking of teacher education so that greater attention is paid to developing student teachers' social-emotional competencies so that they are able to flourish as professionals in what has been described as a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) world. We argue that GTEs who contributed to this research are themselves in a multi-layered VUCA world where they must contend with a dual existential threat, that of global climate and ecological crises and pervasive reforms to ITE such as those in England which seek to constrain and diminish their professional autonomy. GTEs more frequently foregrounded the connections between their role and concerns related to social and environmental injustice, with survey respondents describing the "vital role" of geography education to enable young people to "consider...crucial issues of our time that will impact on their future lives, related to climate change, biodiversity, sustainability, inequality, migration, governance, continuing influence of colonialism..." (P49). This connection between their professional role and global environmental crises was understood by some GTEs as a source of positive professional identity, as they highlighted the contribution they could make to climate change and sustainability education through their work with student geography teachers and the wider support they provided to teachers and young people working in schools providing school placements. In contrast, the policy context for teacher education was only noted as a challenge by GTEs. School-based GTEs highlighted policy changes as increasing the workload and reducing the time school-based mentors had to support student teachers. However, university-based GTEs saw policy changes as one which questioned the value of universities providing research-informed teacher education in partnership with schools and shared their frustration and fears related to feelings of powerlessness in the face of widespread and rapid policy change. For these GTEs, policy change itself created a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world in which to be a teacher educator.

Over the last decade, the fragmentation of the ITE sector in England has seen more GTEs working in isolation in increasingly diverse settings. In this context, Swennen and Powell (2021) suggest that teacher educators might allow themselves to comply or adapt to new government policies rather than resist them in order to survive. We argue that well-networked and collaborative GTEs are better prepared to recognise and resolve differences between the official knowledge and discourse represented in ITE policies and frameworks originating from England (DfE, 2019a, 2019b) and their personal knowledge of geography education through reflective dialogue and joint work. Participating and learning with others in communities of practice (e.g. in seminars, conferences, network meetings and research) can support group thinking, stable identities, research-based practice and the creation of new knowledge (Patton & Parker, 2017; Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; MacPhail, 2021). In this study, the GTE community was cited by participants as a stimulus for subject-specific thinking, a key source of communal professional judgement and knowledge which informed what they did and shaped who they were. Although the GTE community was well-regarded, school-based GTEs were not always aware of its existence, so they drew support from colleagues and school PD,

thus developing their first-order teaching practice, rather than the second-order knowledges and pedagogy for teacher education (Loughran, 1997). This presents what Clandinin and Connelly (1996) describe as a knowledge dilemma, as the policy direction in England demands that teacher education should be “school-led” and “research-informed” (DfE, 2022a). Yet, without teacher educators in universities, the question of who would generate this new knowledge in the field of teacher education remains up in the air.

Beyond the challenges of their role (e.g. time, workload and workplace expectations), GTEs in this study found their work to be enjoyable and rewarding and were able to identify opportunities for professional learning and growth. These focused on activities to support becoming a teacher educator when transitioning from classroom teacher to teacher educator and activities to support being a teacher educator which linked to their practice and institution, and national and international issues. GTEs recognised that becoming a teacher educator was tough, partially due to the lack of training, qualification or formal induction; this was a common finding in the literature (Niklasson, 2019). Mirroring research from England, Finland and Turkey (Czerniawski et al., 2017; Ataş et al., 2020), some GTEs were concerned with their career progression so sought opportunities to write, research and publish. In order to prepare teacher educators to meet the complex demands of teaching teachers and ensure the quality of future teachers (Cochran-Smith et al., 2020), we believe that reading literature, engaging in relevant communities of practice and collaborative teaching and research are the most productive forms of professional learning.

Conclusion

This case study of the identity, roles and professional learning of geography teacher educators in England adds to a body of research which considers who teacher educators are, what they do and how they learn (Ataş et al., 2021). This is essential if we as a community of teacher educators are better able to understand our professional development needs, access support and contribute to a flourishing community of practice. We have described the dual existential threat of policy reform and global environmental crises which continue to create a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) context for teacher educators in England, and (geography) teacher educators across the world. The influence of this VUCA world informed the professional identities of the GTEs in this study in positive and deleterious ways, which we argue are linked to GTEs perceived level of professional autonomy. Frequently GTEs saw the global environmental crises as a context where they could make a positive contribution through their professional lives whereas this contribution continued to be undermined by the destabilising policy environment. Alexander and Bourke (2021) have called on teacher educators to publicly challenge the persistently negative representations of initial teacher education and to be politically savvy and engage with the work of policy makers. We contend that all teacher educators, and especially geography teacher educators, have a particular responsibility to work together and bravely challenge policy making which limits our capacity to leverage our professional roles to enable a socially and environmentally just future for all.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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