

# Initial Teacher Training: Clearing the Hurdles

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## Introduction

Teachers do not go into teaching for an easy life. Nor does initial teacher training provide an easy stroll into the profession. In order to qualify as teachers, all trainees in England are required to meet a range of Professional Standards, encompassing professional values and practice; knowledge and understanding; and teaching. Implicit is the expectation that they develop competence in tackling the routine demands of classroom life. It could be assumed, therefore, that in the assault course of initial teacher training, 'meeting the standards' is the primary obstacle.

However, the challenges of becoming a teacher are much more diverse and specific, within a very compressed time frame - merely 38 weeks in the case of postgraduate courses in England training teachers of primary-aged children (5-11 years). All trainees are faced with common hurdles such as workload, meeting academic requirements and adjusting to working and learning in a rapid succession of educational communities. Additionally, individuals may have to cope with personally significant issues relating to health, relationships, family, domestic matters, relocation away from friends and family, travel, and others. Such issues are frequently cited by trainees who withdraw. Yet most tackle their personal portfolio of challenges successfully to qualify as become teachers. What is it that enables some to clear the hurdles successfully when others falter? Might successful coping strategies serve as useful preparation for the future demands of teaching?

This paper reports some preliminary findings from a set of eight interviews with postgraduate trainees who have completed their Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course successfully. The aim was to identify the range of challenges identified by individuals, whether these changed as the course proceeded, and the coping strategies adopted.

As trainee teachers in many countries must face similar pressures, it is hoped that the findings and implications of this research will be of interest to colleagues wishing to increase

retention and maximise performance amongst their students.

## Summary: Research background

The motivations for entering teaching as a career have been widely researched, and include notably the wish to work with children and help them learn, along with the desire to fulfil a worthwhile role in society, the expectation of intellectual stimulation, enjoyment of working in the school environment, a wish to remain involved with a particular subject discipline and pass on personal enthusiasms, and 'extrinsic' factors such as job security and prospects, salary, holidays and working conditions (Moran et al. 2001, Hayes 2004, Jarvis and Woodrow 2005). Similarly, teachers and trainee teachers offer a range of reasons for leaving, including workload and the associated stress, loss of a 'work-life balance' and pupil misbehaviour (Smithers and Robinson 2001). It has been suggested that a balance is needed between motivators and demotivators (Edmonds et al. 2002, Kyriacou et al. 2003). Motivations to teach relate to anticipated rewards, and where these are not forthcoming, the demotivators may appear more prominent and may ultimately sway a decision to leave.

Expectations at first, however, are high as new teachers, eager and optimistic, first enter their classrooms. Sabar (2004) likens them to migrants in a new country, welcomed for their skills and knowledge, but nonetheless initially marginal. They must actively adjust their expectations and behaviours to align with those of the prevailing culture, while, ironically, being responsible for teaching children whose knowledge of institutional norms is greater than theirs. Sabar suggests that a mismatch between expectations and reality often contributes to a sense of depression and confusion. She points to the importance of a supportive and instrumental environment in which creative collaboration between mentor and novice can

help the new teacher rapidly adjust to become a secure and active participant within the school culture.

If newly qualified teachers face such challenges, trainee teachers, determinedly galloping between Higher Education institution and a rapid succession of schools, are likely to have a tougher time still. This study aims to identify the challenges that trainees face during a PGCE course, and match these where possible with their coping strategies.

### Participants and method

8 postgraduate trainee teachers at the University of Southampton, England, agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview at the end of their course. They were informed that the research was being carried out to explore what for them had been the major challenges during the course, and how they had managed these challenges. A parallel, complementary strand of research involved a questionnaire completed by the majority of trainees in February (mid-point) and June (end). The research questions were:

- What do trainee teachers consider the major challenges in their training?
- Do these perceptions change as the course proceeds?
- How do they claim to deal with such challenges?

The analysis of data is ongoing. In this paper, I have chosen to focus solely on interview data. A broad comparison of interview and survey data indicates that interviewees' responses resonate with those of the wider cohort, but offer greater depth.

### Background information

Table 1 provides background information about the structure of the course.

Table 1 The PGCE (Primary) year at the University of Southampton

Point in course		Location	Major academic work
Sept or earlier		2 weeks in school	
Sept-Dec	First term in University	12 weeks in University inc. 10 days in school Coursework	Assignment 1
Jan-Feb	First school placement	4-6 weeks in school	Assignment 2
Feb-March		3-5 weeks in University Coursework	
March-April	Second school placement	3-4 weeks in school	
April-May		3 weeks in University Coursework	
May-June	Third school placement	4-5 weeks in school, 1 week in University, 2 weeks in school	Final Portfolio
June		1 week in University	

Table 2 lists the challenges identified by trainees and the coping strategies mentioned (not prioritised). Those asterisked were cited by three or more trainees.

### Findings

Challenges	Coping strategies
Start of course	
Uncertainty about teaching as a career	Introductory days in school (H)
Uncertainty about other trainees	Getting to know peers
Uncertainty about course and workload	Experience
Leaving home and family/ partner	Peer support, supportive partner
University work (especially Term 1)	
Heavy workload, competing demands*	Organisation/prioritisation, lists, personal deadlines, step by step Reduced social life, focus on course demands Peer support, supportive partner/family Already used to hard work Talking to tutors
Awareness of weak subject knowledge*	Reading, learning in taught sessions Rationalising purpose of tests, prioritising weakest areas Peer support Talking to tutors and teachers
Tiredness, illness	Rest during vacation
Days in schools, first and second placements (Autumn/Spring)	
Initial uncertainty about school, self as teacher, own role in school	Peer support Introductory days familiarised, 'eased in'
Unsure whether will like class	Experience
Planning workload * Competing demands	Organisation, staying in to work, rejecting perfectionism Seeing how others plan and co-plan Having to plan independently Getting faster with practice Talking to teachers who can confirm it gets better Talking to teachers familiar with specific aspects of PGCE course Putting up with planning because of pleasures of teaching Plan in vacation Peer support, support of partner / family
Poor relationship with class teacher Perceived lack of support	Determination, independent approach Rationalising situation
Lack of confidence	Talking to teachers Being able to practise and learn from mistakes
Expectations of teacher/ school exceed those of course Taking over class when teacher ill	Determination Extra planning Seeing an opportunity rather than a problem
Bad lesson	Rationalising experience - 'all teachers have bad lessons'
Exhaustion	Rest when back in University
Assignments (Autumn/Spring)*	
No desire for M level credits Long and academically daunting Overload - need to focus on planning	Separate out different types of work Consult teacher Choose subject of personal interest
Final placement (Summer)	
Teaching all subjects	Reading to increase background knowledge Asking teacher and other staff for support
Curriculum less predictable	Be flexible
Apply for teaching post during placement	Talk to teachers/ tutor about application Using half-term to think about application
End of course portfolio	Using time freed up from daily planning
General	
Travel - time and tiredness	Appreciating
Family bereavement/time out of class	Switch off from emotions, take minimal time out of placement

## Individual narratives

As might be expected, the emphases of individuals' stories varied substantially, as did the manner of telling. The following three pen portraits provide a sense of the variation.

Gemma, who had taught art and design in a college, was people-centred and perceptive, and found workload the major challenge. She had left home and family, and found the support of her peers invaluable. She talked of a 'roller coaster' year in which she found workload and competing demands overwhelming and exhausting, but also found great joy and fulfilment teaching her pupils: *'It's the kids that do it, they're fantastic!'* She found the support of her class teacher mentors invaluable. She describes herself as having very high personal standards, which may have contributed to her difficulties, and appears to have taken on more than she might reasonably have been expected to in running her first class when her teacher was ill. On final placement, G's grandmother died. She stated, *'You felt guilty that you weren't at home at a bad time in your family, and I've not been there for my mum, but I can't be, I have to switch off completely from that emotional side, because this course doesn't allow for emotional things to happen to you, it just doesn't allow - a couple of days out, you fall behind and then it gets worse and worse.'* Her teaching was graded very highly at the end of the course.

For Chris, in her late twenties, the key challenge was gaining confidence in school. She felt that she had come a great distance during the year, particularly in terms of confidence, despite having had a 'frankly awful' first placement experience with a teacher mentor whom she perceived as extremely unsupportive. She was determined to persevere: *'I wasn't going to let someone put me off something I wanted to do.... I won't quit things, it's just stubbornness more than anything else I think!'* Chris found future placements more satisfactory and completed the course with good grades. She asserted more than once that she found the course workload manageable, and attributed this to previous work experience. She preferred to talk with pre-existing teacher friends, rather than fellow trainees.

Fran, in her early twenties, had worked as a teaching assistant and never doubted that she wanted to teach. She felt 'lucky' that she had three 'good' teaching placements and was comfortable with most University work. She completed the course with good grades. Fran's major challenge was her perceived lack of subject knowledge, which she worked hard to improve by reading and talking with teachers. She also lacked confidence in tackling the assignments, because of the academic content rather than the workload. Fran found the peer support network invaluable: *'Me and my friend Jan, she was worried about her spellings, and I was worried about my maths, so we used to meet up once a week and I would give her spellings and she would give me maths!'*

## Discussion and reflections

The breakdown of challenges summarised in Figure 2 and the accounts above will come as no surprise to colleagues engaged in teacher education. It is self-evident that students' progress on a course will be affected by a wide range of factors, including personality, background and situational factors such as relationships in schools, individual teacher mentors' expectations, class composition, health, family and domestic matters and so on. Despite the common course offered to trainees, their experience and progress can never be identical or indeed predictable. However several points arising from the interviews will be briefly discussed.

Becoming a teacher: transformation across the year

Individuals described their own progress across the year largely in terms of their own problem areas, such as feeling more confident in the classroom, getting faster at planning or feeling in command of subject knowledge. The major challenges appeared to fall in the first half of the course, which corresponded with the period of most withdrawals. In the first term, trainees came to terms with new environments, new people, relentless University workload and the initial transformation of their professional identity. In Spring, school workload increased and diversified, complicated by a second major assignment. Trainees who left tended to claim that teaching wasn't the job they had expected, and that its demands outweighed its rewards (Challen 2005). Trainees must have been aware by now of the nature of teaching, and could see that, following submission of their second assignment, they would be free to focus on refining their practice. In the final term, in yet another setting, they were faced with more extensive planning and teaching, across more subjects, in a typically less predictable curriculum. However, few made specific references to challenges in this period: having overcome most hurdles, they were heading for the finish post, now more 'teacher' than 'trainee'.

### Individuals' motivations for teaching

Research has shown that teachers are motivated by a range of factors, and it has been suggested that if the expected 'rewards' are not met, teachers are more likely to be disaffected by demotivating factors. For example, teachers who primarily enjoy interaction with children may be dissuaded by the concomitant paperwork (Hayes 2004). Gemma falls into this category - a highly social trainee who describes 'highs' (children) and 'lows' (workload); indeed, she finishes by observing: *'I maybe challenged myself with, should I go into teaching? Is there another way that I could work with children ... teaching art classes - I could still teach kids - but I definitely want to give it a go, I've got to get into that classroom and see if I can.'* Helen had not been totally committed at the start of the course, but had become so: *'it was going to the school one day a week, just the kids and ... everything changes, that's why you're doing it, yes.'*

Interestingly, most interviewees did not refer explicitly to an enjoyment of working with children helping them overcome the challenges. No firm conclusion can be drawn on the basis of this study. This could indicate that interaction with children was not a prime motivator for them, or that they did not perceive this as a factor in their response to challenge.

### Determination to succeed

Withdrawal, according to the seven trainees who referred to it, had never been considered seriously. Some referred to their own determination and stubbornness. Fran said, *'I didn't want to give up on it, it wasn't an option. I wanted to get through it, be a teacher - that was the only thing I ever wanted to be.'* Donna agreed: *'It was what I wanted to do, it's only a year out of my life.'* Chris, who had a difficult relationship with her teacher mentor, was determined to maintain control: *'I wasn't going to let someone put me off something I wanted to do.'* The 'want to do' factor was strong: these trainees had the end goal in sight. Teaching was believed to be worth the investment that they had put into the year of training.

While it might be considered useful to be able to assess potential trainees' levels of determination and commitment during the selection process, it is clear from comments such as Helen's (above) that some trainees only become fully committed as the course gets underway, and that this does not impact negatively on their performance.

### Peer support

Six interviewees valued the peer network as a source of social life and also for support. Chris preferred to talk with other friends, while Donna was aware that she interacted less with peers due to living at a distance. Fran observed that *'you don't have time to socialise outside Uni, so you have to have friends in Uni, because that's where you always are, and you're always doing University work, and ... even if they can't help you with what you're doing necessarily, just knowing they were experiencing the same things just made you feel better.'* Anna observed that although her partner was very supportive, he *'can't relate to what it's like to go into a classroom for the first time and meet 30 kids and not know them.'* Gemma was surprised at how *'like-minded'* trainees were: *'I really thought, there'd be all those women, I thought this is going to be terrible, having catfights, you know, it's going to be awful, but actually they're brilliant - and that's been the thing that's helped pick me up again, having the support of the other students there at all times at the start.'*

From the point of view of teacher training providers, it would appear that the support of students for each other in a tightly structured, labour-intensive and emotionally packed course is a powerful force to be drawn upon. It is possible that trainees who are unable to access this support and cannot discuss their troubles with others *'in the same boat'*, may find it more difficult to cope with problems that arise, and may require more support, for example, from tutors.

### The importance of school placements

It is clear that school placement is for trainees the heart of their learning: *'school is where I really really learned things'* (Gemma). Those trainees who had unfortunate experiences on placement - Chris and Donna - looked back on them philosophically and expressed relief that they had gone on to have enjoyable and productive later placements. It would be interesting to learn the teachers' perspective, which may be very different (Chambers, Coles and Roper 2002). Teachers were mentioned more frequently than children, sometimes generally - *'she was fantastic'* - and sometimes very specifically: *'she was a student here, she showed me her PDP (file) and so I knew where we were all going with it, and she gave me loads of praise, all the time'* (Helen). With the exceptions mentioned, interviewees commended their teacher mentors highly, far more frequently than University tutors. There was no suggestion that trainees found it difficult to make the cultural shifts between University and a series of schools. The role of their teacher mentors would have eased these transitions, and it may be speculated that the official status of trainees as temporary learners within the community may generate expectations and behaviours on the part of both trainees and host institution which are specific to that role - a different situation from that experienced by a newly qualified teacher taking up a first post.

The study reiterates the centrality of the school and teacher mentor in training (Hobson 2002), and the importance of institutions doing their utmost to ensure high quality mentoring, difficult as this may be.

### Different perspectives on workload

PGCE courses are notorious for their intensive workload, and *'workload'* is commonly recognized as a contributory factor to trainees leaving. However these interviews indicate that most trainees had expected heavy workload, and that they did not all perceive the same workload in the same way. For Gemma, workload was overwhelming; for Chris, it proved very manageable. Trainees described a range of coping strategies, in particular relating to personal organisational skills and the support of teacher mentors and peers. It may be that, rather than a reduction in workload *per se* being seen as the *'solution'*, mastering the skills needed to cope is a valuable part of

becoming a *'multi-tasking'* teacher.

### The ability to reflect and rationalise

A number of trainees took reasoned positions on the challenges that confronted them. Chris, for example, reasoned that her teacher mentor's attitude towards her was paradoxical: *'it's quite odd that people who teach children every day can't apply the same skills to adults, and feel the need*

*to discourage you, which you'd never do to a child ... I decided I'm just going to get through it, and move on to the next one, and it did get a lot better.'* Meanwhile Esther taught a disastrous lesson: *'it was just an awful lesson ... and I kept thinking I can't do it, don't want to do it ... but then I thought, hang on a minute, not every teacher has a good lesson...'* Comments like these not only indicate the ability to reflect, and to deal with problems, but the ability to use negative experiences to grow professionally. Admissions staff may find it useful to provide candidates for places on a teacher training course with opportunities to demonstrate their capacity to reflect constructively on their experience.

### Concluding comments

This analysis is preliminary and essentially comparative. It highlights the variation between trainees in their perceptions of the challenges generated by an intensive course, and demonstrates that no individual element of the course is necessarily stressful.

Teaching is a job requiring a very flexible blend of qualities and skills, some personal rather than merely professional. This study indicates the interaction between these, across a range of professional learning contexts, as graduates who are motivated to teach metamorphose into newly-qualified teachers, clearing the particular hurdles that rise high for them through their own efforts and the active support of others.

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