

A red hoodie is shown from the front, laid flat. The hoodie has a white drawstring and a white ribbed hem. The text 'SUCCEEDING ON YOUR PRIMARY PGCE' is printed in white, bold, block letters across the chest. The words are arranged in four lines: 'SUCCEEDING ON' (curved), 'YOUR' (large), 'PRIMARY' (medium), and 'PGCE' (large). Below the text, there are two white dashed-line outlines of boots, one on each side, positioned as if they are part of the hoodie's design.

SUCCEEDING ON
YOUR
PRIMARY
PGCE

GRAHAM BIRRELL, HELEN TAYLOR & HELLEN WARD



Succeeding on Your Primary PGCE

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Succeeding on Your Primary PGCE

Graham Birrell,
Helen Taylor and
Hellen Ward



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So you want to be a primary teacher?

Graham Birrell



this chapter

- will help you to make up your mind, if you are considering teaching as a career;
- provides information on the different sorts of routes into teaching.

Why read this book?

This book is not aimed at telling you how to be a great teacher. It isn't a textbook for a PGCE; its aim is not to provide a 'how to guide'; we don't want to supply rigorous academic support for your university assignments or how to get through the teaching placements when you're in school. Instead, what this book is about is offering some insight, guidance and helpful advice on how you might wish to approach a PGCE and all its component parts. It wants to share with you some of the collective experience of PGCE course directors and what we believe makes a successful PGCE student.

Between us, we have decades of experience on teaching and leading PGCEs and in that time we have spent many hours discussing successful PGCE students. During this we have learned a lot from these students, about how

they have approached the course and about exactly why they have done so well. After many years of talking to our students and to each other we thought it might be useful to share our experiences with you. This book puts together basic principles and advice in one place, to give you a head start on successfully completing your PGCE.

PGCEs can be a struggle or they can be a liberating, fulfilling and mind-stretching exercise in personal and professional development. After over 20 years of collective experience of teaching on and leading PGCE programmes, we believe we can help you to achieve the latter rather than simply the former. This book has been structured and written to help you in achieving the very most from your PGCE year (and hopefully beyond). There are chapters on key areas of the year, from successfully completing university elements, to thriving in school and even to landing that crucial first job, and this book aims to support you through what is likely to be the most (or one of the most) challenging professional years of your life.

As stated previously, this book is very much *not* meant to be a 'how-to' guide or a step-by-step walk through. We believe in individualised routes through the course, and such a book would suggest there are simple answers to complex questions that everyone can tick off in the same way. There is also no quick-fix to the PGCE and the answers to the questions you'll face on the course are far more likely to come from within rather than from a manual.

What this book hopes to achieve, based on our experience of successfully overseeing literally thousands of teaching students, is a *philosophy* towards being successful on a primary PGCE. Not a 'how to do it' but a 'how to approach it'. After working with so many students for so long, the differences between those who do well and those who struggle can be quite clear. Students who have that liberating, fulfilling and mind-stretching experience commonly approach the course in very different ways to those who don't. We want to share that approach with you, so that you too can have that experience and become better teachers of our children as a result.

Are you sure you want to be a teacher?

Teaching really isn't for everyone and for many some stories that regularly do the rounds, either in the press or amongst friends and families, would be more than enough to prevent them applying. A perception amongst many is that it is all about long hours spent planning, preparing and marking, constant stress, difficult parents, relentless new initiatives from the government, the seemingly ever increasing concerns over poorly behaved children, Ofsted inspections, SATs and league tables, etc., etc. On top of all this, teaching as a career choice has a somewhat mixed reputation. Teachers themselves have long sought the

same kind of status as lawyers and doctors, but the reality is that they are only very rarely talked of in the same breath.

This is especially true of primary school teachers, where there is a very flawed perception that you don't have to be particularly bright or intellectual to succeed in the job. After all, just exactly how hard is it to make stuff out of junk and write pretty little stories about fairies and what you did in the holidays? Part of this image comes from the fact that the normal primary school set-up involves no subject specialist teaching, so therefore the theory goes that those with an in-depth understanding of subjects would be more likely to end up teaching in secondary schools. This understanding of primary teaching as not being particularly academic is neither helpful nor true, but can be found even in the most surprising of quarters. Rather ironically for someone co-authoring a book about succeeding on a Primary PGCE, I actually began my journey into teaching wanting to be a secondary school teacher (for similar reasons to those discussed above, e.g. I wanted to inspire 'academic excellence' in my subject – history) so I applied and was accepted onto a Secondary PGCE. As part of this I had to gain some observation experience at a primary school before the course began. Much to my surprise I discovered that I really enjoyed it, and after a few weeks of my secondary course realised that I much preferred working with younger children. Fortunately, I was able to transfer onto the Primary PGCE and when I saw my secondary tutor for the final time his straight-faced parting words were 'I hope you have a nice time with the plasticine'.

All this isn't to say that primary teachers aren't respected in society, but the perception of many is all too often shaped by the regularly negative stories on it in the media. For example, how did people react when you told them you were thinking of becoming a primary teacher? Was there overwhelming delight and pride? Or was there something of a reserved, cautious reaction followed by the words that began this section: 'Are you sure?'

In truth, if you've had this reaction to what is, in your opinion, exciting news, don't be disappointed. In fact, I'd say it was about right. Teaching, and since it's the subject of this book, primary school teaching, is *not* something to enter into lightly. You do have to be sure: very, very sure. You need to know what you're letting yourself in for, and if you don't that makes you a little foolish and naïve.

Now if this all sounds a somewhat negative then don't worry, because there is of course another side to this story. Teaching can be a fabulously rewarding, life-long career. Days are filled with variety, unexpected events, hilarity, challenge and, when done well, you really do regularly get those moments when you realise you have made a positive (and even life-changing) difference to the lives of other people. Yes, it is hard work, but there are few jobs where you can say with hand on heart you are capable of potentially making such an incredibly positive effect on so many people's lives.

So how do you know you're sure?

A large number of people who apply to train to be a teacher have a slightly misty-eyed impression of what primary school teaching is all about. You can see this in their applications, in their interview and, if they get that far, in their first few weeks on the course. This can be observed in the statement 'I want to be primary school teacher because I really like children'.

Now, we're not saying that liking children isn't important, or even more ridiculously that it's actually more important to not like children. The point is that 'liking children' is very far from the best reason for wanting to be a teacher. 'Liking children' is really not going to get you very far in actually 'teaching' children anything. Rather unsurprisingly, it's not going to hurt, but children don't automatically learn or want to learn simply because their teacher likes them.

Very few experienced teachers will say they enjoy teaching because they 'like children'. The more experience you gain, the more you will come to appreciate the pleasure in 'working with children' (which is subtly, but importantly different to 'teaching children') and in inspiring children and facilitating learning and developing enquiring, inquisitive, critical and challenging minds.

If you haven't done so already, there is really only one way to properly answer the question 'Why do you want to be a teacher?' and that is to go and spend some time in a primary school, and a state primary school at that. This is not to make a statement about the independent sector, but the practical aim of Primary PGCEs is about meeting the government standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in the state sector. A very practical point of also gaining this experience is that without it, it's unlikely you're going to get a PGCE place anyway.



reflective task

If you haven't done so already, you will need to get some experience in a primary school. To help you decide if teaching is for you, think carefully about the following questions:

- Did you get a realistic flavour of what the job involved?
- Did you ask the teachers in the school(s) about what their jobs entailed?
- Did the teachers seem to enjoy what they did? If not, why not?

- Did you enjoy it?
- Did the children respond positively to you?
- Could you explain things (fairly) clearly to them?
- Can you see skills and attributes in yourself that would be transferable to the classroom?

If you answered ‘yes’ to most, if not all of these questions, then you’re making a far more informed decision about becoming a teacher, certainly far more informed than ‘I like children’. In fact, many people reading this book may have already applied and been offered a place on a Primary PGCE, or even started one, and if so deserve a well done on a great decision. If you answered ‘no’ to most of the questions then that might be telling you something!

What courses could you apply for?

Although there are many different types of course available (e.g. full-time routes, part-times routes, modular routes, etc.), for postgraduates interested in the primary age phase, there are essentially three main ways you can qualify: the PGCE (Professional Graduate Certificate in Education – or Postgraduate Certificate if you attain more than 40 credits towards a Master’s degree as part of the course), and in Scotland the PGDE (the Professional Graduate Diploma in Education), which is essentially the same course as a PGCE; the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP); or School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT).

PGCEs, whether full-time, part-time or modular, will all involve significant periods of time at a Higher Education institution, usually a university, where participants will attend large numbers of lectures and seminars on courses looking at the themes, issues and subjects in primary teaching. These courses will be assessed through things like assignments, oral presentations, poster presentations, etc. Most universities now assess some or all of the university course assessment at Master’s level, enabling successful students to gain part of a Master’s whilst on the PGCE. As well as attendance at university, all PGCEs will involve two, three, or maybe even four placements in at least two different schools. These placements (and especially the last one, which is normally the longest and most strenuous in terms of expectations) must be passed in order to achieve Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).