

Life as a Probationer Teacher
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The decision to enter teaching in my mid-thirties was one I did not take lightly. Although I had some previous experience in education, this was limited to teaching an entirely different subject (Marketing) to adults of different ages, and at university level. I thoroughly enjoyed the time I had spent working in higher education, and was motivated that the time devoted to preparing lessons seemed to be appreciated by my students, some of whom had just completed a full day's work before studying for three hours in the evening. However, I had always been eager to teach French - my first degree was in Marketing and French - and teaching in the secondary sector had appealed to me for some time. I was delighted to be accepted for a place on the PGCE Secondary course at the University of Glasgow in 2004.

This first year in Initial Teacher Education was varied, demanding and, above all, interesting. The University of Glasgow's PGCE provides placements at three schools. I was very fortunate to be placed in successful, well-run departments in three quite different schools with diverse catchment areas.

What initially struck me about the difference between my previous teaching experience and that of being in schools was that the pupils were not always as appreciative of the long evenings spent preparing lessons as my other, older students. In addition to this, I had never experienced disruptions to classes caused by discipline issues. It was extremely interesting to observe how experienced teachers dealt with these issues, many using different techniques with varying degrees of success.

During my time spent on placement, several teachers advised that I should take as much as possible out of this year in terms of watching other teachers teach as there are fewer opportunities to observe how others do the job you are doing once you yourself have started.

I can honestly say that I learnt a considerable amount during my ITE year. Observing different teaching styles, watching how different teachers interact with pupils, how they organise their teaching and planning, enabled me to be very selective and decide which strategies I thought would be most useful for me to adopt in the future.

Although you are part of a department whilst on student placement and contribute to the teaching of classes for whom you are responsible, it is during the probationer year that you really see your pupils making progress, so much of which is based on your input! At this stage, you become fully aware of the importance of the role of the class teacher and being responsible for the education of so many students. Observing pupils make advancement in the language you're teaching them, because of your input (and theirs!), is highly rewarding.

My last placement of the year was in East Renfrewshire, which was my first choice for my probationer-year placement. I was delighted when I received the letter informing me that I would be placed in Eastwood High, a highly-regarded school within the local authority. I am very fortunate to be in a dynamic, evolving Modern Languages department in a school which has an excellent reputation. The department has two new staff members (myself and another colleague who completed her probationer year last year), a new Principal Teacher, and four established staff members who very quickly welcomed me to the department. It is encouraging and motivating to be accepted as a full member of staff who is expected to contribute fully to the running of the department and be involved in curriculum development, extra-curricular activities and teach an NQT's timetable of seventeen periods a week to a varied mix of classes. I am currently involved in producing the department's first parent newsletter, which will help keep parents better informed of all new developments and activities within our department.

Each year-group presents various challenges and, in my department, each teacher has a very fair mix of classes of different abilities and support needs. Some lessons can be incredibly rewarding when, for example, you are satisfied by how quickly and effectively pupils grasp and use the latest grammar point you have been teaching, yet during the next lesson, you may be met with much more challenging behaviour and less motivated pupils. However, this presents the teacher with useful learning experiences - differentiating your lessons to meet the needs of a particular class, and to observe this work successfully, is very rewarding.

Both East Renfrewshire Council and Eastwood High provide excellent opportunities for probationers and established teachers. The local authority has a clearly set-out framework for Continuing Professional Development covering all stages of the career path of teachers within the authority. For the probationer, there is a range of highly relevant core and optional sessions. A recent modern language-related course on the changeover to National Qualifications has helped equip us with the information we require to allow us to switch from standard grade next year.

At school level, the four probationers meet regularly with our CPD coordinator, who ensures that we experience all aspects of the school and not only our own departments. The wide range of sessions which have been arranged includes, amongst others, meeting with staff members responsible for pupil support, anti-bullying policy, pastoral care and equality. We will also be visiting associated primary schools and attending forthcoming School Board, Parent-Teacher Association and Pupil Council meetings. I have a weekly meeting with my mentor - my Principal Teacher - and this gives me the opportunity to discuss any relevant issues or ask for advice on any element of my teaching.

Both the school and the local authority provide a high level of support for established teachers and NQTs. For example, I am currently participating in the recently-introduced Framework for Intervention programme which addresses low-level disruption within the classroom by matching a trained frameworker (a teacher from within the school) with a colleague.

Undoubtedly, my probationer year has given me the opportunity to experience school life at every level. We are encouraged to be involved in activities which enable us to relate to pupils outside the classroom as well as inside. I am currently involved with the school's yearbook committee and Young Enterprise Scotland team, both of which are giving me the opportunity to bring some of my pre-teaching experience to the activities of each group.

All in all, this year and last year have been extremely rewarding. I believe that the ITE year provides excellent training for the subsequent probationer year, and this year seems like a natural progression from the PGCE. Like many students nearing the end of the ITE year, I felt very eager (and capable) of taking on my own classes and preparing them for a full year of French - and I consider my probationer year to be a natural extension of that. To anyone currently undertaking the PGCE, I would strongly recommend that you take as much as possible from observing different teachers teach different subjects, decide what suits you, and use this to develop your own teaching style in the forthcoming year and beyond.

An important piece of advice we were given as students last year, when discussing how to teach modern languages to children, was that we should teach in "small steps" and ensure that pupils know exactly how each point of a lesson relates to preceding and future lessons. The same strategy applies to the new teacher - never feel that you are drowning in your work; take one step at a time and, above all, be well organised!