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What enables student geography teachers to thrive during their PGCE year and beyond?

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the perspectives of six student teachers (including five geography specialists) and two teacher educators, four key components are identified as being crucial to enable those undertaking a geography-focused programme of Initial Teacher Education to thrive rather than simply survive. These include, (1) nurturing an enjoyment of geography, (2) engaging with education research to underpin classroom practice, (3) developing communities of practice within and beyond school and university settings and, (4) building teacher identity through regular reflection that considers an individual's values. These insights will have relevance for those considering or undertaking a career as a geography teacher and for school and university partnerships that provide Initial Teacher Education programmes.

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Introduction

Becoming a teacher is a challenging and enriching endeavour. This “Directions” article has been written by a staff and student team based at the same Higher Education Institution (HEI): Authors 1 and 2 are teacher educators and Authors 3–8 were student teachers who completed the same Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme between September 2020 and June 2021. The article is primarily aimed at those training to become teachers as well as those who are at the earlier stages of considering a career as a secondary school geography teacher. Although the experiences shared in this article are drawn from student teachers and teacher educators from one Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) route offered by a London-based HEI in partnership with a network of schools, we argue that the ideas shared have broader relevance to those involved in ITE in and outside of the secondary geography context, through the various pathways to qualification, across England and beyond. Bringing together the perspectives of both student teachers and teacher educators, we share four key components that we have identified as being crucial to enable those undertaking a geography PGCE to thrive rather than simply survive. These include, (1) nurturing an enjoyment of geography, (2)

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engaging with education research to underpin classroom practice, (3) developing communities of practice within and beyond school and university settings and, (4) building teacher identity through regular reflection that considers an individual's values.

Throughout this article we draw on the perspectives and experiences of five geography PGCE students (Authors 3–6 and Author 8), foregrounding their ideas to share what has enabled them to thrive during this challenging programme of study. These perspectives have been gathered via semi-structured interviews (each lasting about 30–40 minutes) between each of the five geography PGCE students and the first author (a teacher educator) at three points during the PGCE year 2020–2021 (October, February, and April). These interviews were focused on providing the PGCE students with the opportunity to share their experiences and ideas about becoming a geography teacher outside the formal assessment and tutorial system of the PGCE programme. A full account of the interviews, including details of the interview schedules and data collection process can be found in Rushton (2021). The research was approved by the researchers' university Ethics Committee on 6 August 2020.

Once these interviews were completed, the first and second author (both teacher educators) discussed and reflected upon the interview transcripts and shared together their own perspectives and experiences of how best to support student geography teachers. At this point the first author identified an opportunity to work with the student teachers who had been interviewed using the "Students as Partners" (SaP) approach to co-author this article. Such an approach involves students and staff working together to develop new learning and insights (Healey et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). To begin with, the first and second author developed a draft summary of this article which brought together insights from both student geography teachers and teacher educators. This draft was shared with each student co-author for their comments and feedback. At this stage the perspectives and insights of a PGCE student from outside the geography subject specialism was sought by the first author to ensure that the findings had relevance for those from across the PGCE programme. In this case the student teacher was completing a PGCE in Latin with Classics (Author 7) at the same HEI during the same academic year. All the feedback provided by the student teachers was shared between the authorial team and considered during the subsequent development of the article. As a team of authors, we noted both the consistency and clarity of our shared ideas and also identified examples of differences in emphasis rather than the nature of our individual experiences. For example, one student teacher author underlined the importance of the support they had received from friends and family during the PGCE, and this was added to the article at this point in the writing process. In this way, this article is a co-produced effort between teacher educators (Authors 1 and 2) and student teachers (Authors 3–8) that models the ethos of the PGCE programme, which is founded on partnership and reflective practice.

Component one: nurturing an enjoyment of geography

One of the most common motivations to become a geography teacher is because an individual loves the subject of geography and wishes to share that enthusiasm with young people. Geography as a discipline benefits from being far reaching both temporally and spatially, and arguably includes something that will spark interest and curiosity in everyone. A key part of building confidence as a teacher is to develop subject knowledge, not only to

learn about areas that teachers are required to teach or need to refresh (although these are important aspects) but to gain enjoyment from learning more about an area of the discipline. The plethora of writings, television programmes and podcasts that are freely available make engaging with geography as a discipline extremely accessible. There can be the perception that once a person moves into the professional space of a geography classroom, the emphasis is placed on the role of the teacher, who is “classroom ready” and able to take responsibility for the learning of their pupils (Churchward & Willis, 2019) rather than the geographer, who has disciplinary expertise. At the same time, as teacher educators, we note that teaching geography in the secondary school also places new demands on student teachers to broaden their subject knowledge in ways that run contrary to the increasing need to specialize at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Having confidence in and enjoyment of the subject is also an important part of engaging pupils in lessons, an interesting fact or new concept often provides a vital “hook” into a topic or unit of work that enthuses pupils from the outset.

Whilst the teaching aspect is of course crucial, so too is a teachers’ identity as a geographer so that they can nurture their own enjoyment of their professional life. As teacher educators we encourage the student teachers we work with to continue to develop their own areas of interest as a core part of their ongoing professional development. Among the authors of this article, we have varied geographical interests that span a range of topics including young people’s geographies, air pollution and local community action, palaeoecology and hazard management policy. Throughout the PGCE, student teachers have had opportunities to extend their understanding of these areas of interest and have had access to the university library and collections to support this aspect of their work. During the course student teachers had regular opportunities to share interests and specialisms in formal (e.g. presentations) and informal ways (e.g. adding links to websites or podcasts in a shared WhatsApp group) with the cohort of student teachers and in this way have engaged in peer-to-peer support both to nurture individual subject knowledge and to extend that of others. Some PGCE students have also given seminars or short lectures to groups of pupils whilst at placement schools to share aspects of geography that are more frequently studied at university. In this way PGCE students have both extended their own subject knowledge and have also provided the pupils they teach with a greater insight into what studying geography is like at university. As a group of student teachers who had all recently completed undergraduate degrees, they were able to be “near-peer” role models for their students, who could answer questions pupils may have about university life.

In these ways, we as student teachers and teacher educators underline the importance of regularly engaging with geography as a subject in a manner that encourages teachers to embrace and continue to nurture areas of specialism and personal interest. We suggest that teachers can see their profession as a springboard from which they can continue to learn and acquire new knowledge, for example, by inviting speakers and going to talks, such that the profession itself can facilitate geographical learning. This should be a thread that runs through the PGCE programme of study and beyond.

Component two: engaging with education research to underpin classroom practice

Unlike other training routes, the PGCE is a post-graduate degree programme of study which requires individuals to engage deeply with the theory and practice of education through inter-related components of academic post-graduate study and school-based practice (Maguire et al., 2018). On completion of the PGCE, students will have an understanding of research that underpins core areas such as teaching and learning, curriculum design, inclusion, cognitive development and classroom management. Through this, the PGCE student teachers have become aware of the broader educational policy context in which these areas work, as well as with the specialised research literature relevant to a chosen subject (for example, Roberts, 2013; Walkington et al., 2018). PGCE teaching includes lecturers, seminars and tutorials which provide different opportunities to engage with education research in these varied areas, and PGCE students can expect to participate in group activities such as reading groups and presentations as well as individual written assignments. Such assignments have required student teachers and teacher educators to engage critically with a range of literature including research articles, policy documents, sources of numerical data relevant to schools and classroom materials. Together, student teachers and teacher educators have also considered the ethical issues involved in conducting in-service evaluations of our practice which draw on giving and receiving feedback and analysing school data including that related to attainment.

The time and focus needed to thoroughly engage with education research can appear daunting to student teachers. It is important from the outset to identify a regular (perhaps weekly) space to engage with literature (reading or listening) and to reflect on how this reading connects with practice in the classroom. There is now an increasing amount of open-access literature that is available online. Through the taught academic modules, we as student teachers have had opportunities to share what we have read with others and draw on the insights of our peers and those who have taught us.

Schools also frequently provide “twilight” professional development sessions that feature ideas from education research. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the academic element of the PGCE is the way that whilst working as student teachers, we have been introduced to a range of perspectives and ideas that are grounded in research and we are encouraged by our tutors to explore which of these tools and resources will “work” in our own teaching practice as we develop our own “teaching philosophy”. Furthermore, the PGCE requires us to critically evaluate the literature we read and the concepts and ideas that are presented. Through this critical engagement we as student teachers have chosen and reflected upon ideas from research and policy that inform our planning and evaluation of lessons, including a sequence of lessons that we have developed independently and taught in school. Engaging with research in this way requires space and time and the structure of the PGCE, with a gradual increasing of teaching hours and wider responsibilities, has enabled us to develop our abilities as a post-graduate student from the outset that has supported our emerging classroom practice. As we become more established in our teaching careers, we intend to contribute more, for example, through a school staff reading group where we can share and discuss ideas more broadly with colleagues across our department and school communities.

Component three: establishing communities of practice within and beyond school and university settings

Teaching and teacher education is a highly social endeavour that involves various groups of people including students, other teachers, mentors, professional services and support staff, parents and university-based academics and tutors. The spaces of teaching and teacher education are centred on the school classroom. They also include other settings such as the university, subject associations, groups and learned societies which occupy physical and digital spaces (e.g. websites, online conferences and meetings, podcasts, social media). These groups and spaces together form communities of practice (Wenger, 2000) that can provide support and opportunities for development within and beyond school and university settings and we will consider each setting in turn.

As part of a PGCE programme, we as teacher educators note that the first community of practice that is established is that provided by the university setting. This includes PGCE students from both the geography subject group as well as students and tutors from across the programme including those in other subject disciplines such as science, English and mathematics. This community of practice is developed in the formal settings and spaces of the university through contributions to seminars, reading groups, tutorials and as part of informal social settings both online and in person. Through engaging with peers through these different settings, we observe that PGCE students can establish relationships centred on peer-support, sharing ideas and perspectives that frequently reduce the everyday anxieties experienced by new entrants to the profession such as fears about knowing the answer to pupils' questions, being able to manage behaviour, balancing workloads with other commitments and even finding the way round an unfamiliar school site. As teacher educators we underline with our student teachers how crucial it is to take the time to establish such relationships with peers from the outset of the PGCE and we provide time and support during the initial weeks of the programme for these relationships to develop.

Other groups of people in the university community of practice include academic and personal tutors, researchers and university-based programme officers. It is a priority that PGCE students identify the key staff they will work with over the course of the programme and establish with them shared expectations for ways of working and communicating so that strong relationships are in place that will provide support and guidance during inevitable periods of difficulty. Practically this can mean understanding mutually convenient ways of communicating, identifying regular "office hours" or drop-in sessions and prioritising engaging with tutorials. Together these groups provide student teachers with important social, emotional, practical and academic support in the earliest weeks of navigating the processes, documents, policies and learning associated with becoming a teacher. As well as providing solace during periods of difficulty, these relationships can be hugely enriching and rewarding and extend beyond the length of the PGCE programme.

The second core community of practice is that provided by the placement schools. Frequently, PGCE students will spend two periods of about 12 weeks each in two contrasting school placements. In these placements they will be supported by an established geography teacher who will work as their mentor and give regular feedback through observations and a weekly 1:1 meeting. As well as the geography or humanities

department or faculty within the school the PGCE student accesses a community of practice across the school, working with other teachers to develop their practice through continuing professional development sessions and meeting with and observing the work of staff who have specialist expertise in areas including Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, English as Additional Language and Inclusion more broadly.

Throughout our time as student teachers, we have seen the value of observing other teachers at work within and beyond geography so that we can continue to develop and reflect upon our own practice. Across the school community of practice, these professional relationships are key, they take work, consideration and organisation. It is often difficult to manage the seemingly competing demands of university assignments, lesson planning and extra-curricular opportunities and as student teachers we note how important it is to discuss any difficulties or concerns you have managing the PGCE workload with your school mentor and your university tutor so that they can help you prioritise and identify efficient ways of working. For example, through such discussions we as student teachers understood how important it is to spend time discussing another teacher's lesson, and that the time to do this diminishes as careers progress. Therefore, lesson observations and subsequent reflective discussions were prioritised throughout our time in school placements and our school mentors and university tutors provided us with additional support to plan and resource lessons during periods of university assignment deadlines, so that lesson observation time was not deprioritised.

When observing a lesson as a student teacher, we have considered the questions that we want to ask the teacher after the lesson so that we can gain a better understanding of the choices made by the teacher. By establishing honest and respectful relationships with those we have worked with in school and university we have been better able to seek and receive support that has enabled us to flourish as geography teachers. Finally, as PGCE students it has been important for us to remember that we can also shape the practice of other more experienced colleagues. For example, when teachers observe our lessons, they have often wanted to incorporate our ideas, resources, and approaches into their own lessons and perhaps across the department. In this way our work in schools as PGCE students can have a legacy that lasts beyond the placement and is indicative of an enriching community of practice.

Beyond the school and university settings there are myriad opportunities for PGCE students to engage with geography teachers across the UK and the world and as teacher educators we have sought to share these networks and opportunities with student teachers. For example, The Geographical Association and the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers both provide extensive opportunities through "TeachMeets" and conference events both online and in person for geography teachers to connect with others. Social media, including Twitter, has also provided a popular tool for geography teachers to network providing various opportunities including weekly webinars in term time hosted by "GeogChat" and resource curation and sharing by the "Early Careers Geography Network". Another professional development opportunity for geography teachers which has a presence on social media includes "Routes Geography Journal". "Routes" is an online journal where sixth form (the last two years of secondary school) and undergraduate geographers publish their research that is peer reviewed and edited by a team of geography teachers and academics based in schools and universities (Nayeri & Rushton, 2021).

As student teachers, the capacity to connect with geography teachers across the country and beyond enables us to collaborate with others in similar and different contexts with complementary and contrasting outlooks. This has been and continues to be especially important for those working in schools with small subject specialist teams, or perhaps where geography is not as highly valued as other subjects. This aspect has also helped us to continue to maintain and reinforce our subject knowledge during our PGCE and this is something we will take forward over our first two years as Early Career Teachers.

Component four: building teacher identity through regular reflection that considers an individual's values

As teacher educators and student teachers, we understand that a key part of becoming a teacher is developing reflective practice. This means being able to critically examine and evaluate our own teaching (and observations of others') and apply these reflections to further develop our teaching. In practice as a student teacher this involves completing reflections (usually in writing) of individual lessons at least weekly and discussing these with a school mentor and university-based personal tutor. These reflections have supported us to identify and, with our mentor, agree current strengths in our teaching and areas which should become targets for subsequent development in the short, medium and long term. When evaluating our practice as student teachers over the course of a lesson or a series of lessons, the key area of focus has been the impact of the lesson(s) on pupil progress. To support and structure our reflections we have frequently used the following questions shared in [Table 1](#).

Developing reflective practice is a crucial part of understanding how and why pupils are making progress. Reflective practice is also a way to understand our own values and identity as a teacher and teacher educator and how this may change over time and in response to working in different contexts. Teacher identity or professional identity can be simply understood as the kind of teacher you want to be and research that explores teacher identity recognizes that teachers bring themselves to their work or, as Palmer (1997, p. 15) succinctly puts it, "we teach who we are". Over the course of the PGCE we have had regular opportunities to consider research (for example, Beauchamp & Thomas,

Table 1. Questions to prompt and structure lesson evaluation and wider reflective practice.

Are pupils making good progress?
What is the evidence?
Are pupils engaged in, and enthusiastic about their learning?
Are pupils willing, and able, to talk about what they are learning?
Can pupils communicate about what they need to do to improve?
Do pupils have a sense of the bigger picture: not just what they are learning, but why?
Is there evidence in pupil work to support your judgment?
Which individuals or groups are making better progress than others?
How do you know this? What barriers can you identify that are impacting on progress?
Identify one aspect of the lesson that was a significant success for you.
Why do you think this was successful?
What interventions will you put in place to promote continued/greater pupil progress in next lesson(s)?
What support do you need to implement any of the above?
(These can be discussion points for weekly meeting(s).)

2009; Brooks, 2016, 2017) and reflect upon our identity as teachers (and teacher educators) for example, through semi-structured interviews, tutorials and group discussion sessions. Questions that we have reflected upon over time have included:

- How would you describe yourself as a teacher?
- What is the role of a teacher?
- What is the purpose of education?
- Can you describe the teacher you want to become?
- What values do you hold and how do they relate to your work as a teacher?

By regularly returning to these questions and previous responses (captured through individual notes and/or an interview transcript) we have explored how some aspects of our identity as student teachers have shifted in response to working in contrasting school placements, developing relationships with teachers and pupils and engaging with pedagogical and subject specific research. We have also reflected on the varied experiences we have brought with us to our PGCE studies. These experiences included working in outdoor learning settings as instructors and mountain guides and coaching young people's sport as well as work in corporate sectors including transport, marketing, hospitality, and retail. We have considered how these aspects of our identity can inform and support us as we develop new professional identities as teachers. Although at times it can be challenging to set aside time and space to reflect on our teacher identity, we have found it hugely valuable in helping us to locate aspects of our previous and current professional lives that are enriching and fulfilling and those which are not and ascertain ways to foreground those aspects we enjoy. This rich understanding of the people we are and the teachers we would like to be, has helped us navigate the complex process of applying for teaching roles and enabled us to better recognize which type of school would complement our professional values and identity. Through this ongoing work, we suggest that we are better placed to remain in the profession in the long-term.

Final thoughts

Through this article we, as a staff and student team of authors, have shared our insights as to the approaches that support geography PGCE students to thrive during what is widely acknowledged as a demanding and challenging programme of study. We note the crucial support that our families and friends beyond the PGCE programme have provided and highlight the importance of these relationships in keeping us connected with our own sense of self. We hope that our reflections and ideas will be of interest to those involved in geography teacher education including those training to teach geography, Early Career Teachers, mentors and researchers, as well as those who are considering a new direction as a geography teacher. As student geography teachers and teacher educators, we have seen for ourselves the responsibilities and privileges that geography teachers have and how young people look to us as geographers to support them in making sense of the world around them. The important role that geography teachers play is unlikely to diminish as society continues to wrestle with complex challenges including global pandemics and the climate emergency and the inequitable way that the consequences and burdens of these challenges are felt by

some parts of our local and global societies. Now, more than ever, we need to support and enable geographers to thrive within the teaching profession so that we are better equipped to provide young people with a geographical education that enriches society as a whole.

Further resources

Geographical Association (<https://www.geography.org.uk/>)

- Teaching Resources: <https://www.geography.org.uk/Teaching-Resources>
- Journals with a focus on teaching and learning in geography: <https://www.geography.org.uk/Journals>
- Resources for Geography Initial Teacher Education: <https://www.geography.org.uk/ITE-geography-content>

Royal Geographical Society with IBG (<https://www.rgs.org/>)

- Teaching Resources: <https://www.rgs.org/schools/teaching-resources/>
- Curriculum and Professional Support: <https://www.rgs.org/schools/curriculum-and-professional-support/>

Routes – the Journal for Student Geographers (<https://routesjournal.org/>)

- Lesson Resources: <https://routesjournal.org/peer-review/lessonresources/>

Disclosure statement

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