
My NQT Year: a primary teacher's account of his first year of teaching

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ABSTRACT This article describes and reflects on the experience of a newly qualified teacher (NQT) in an inner-city primary school awaiting its Ofsted inspection under Gove's regime.

Myself and My Class

I had always believed that I wanted to teach. I was originally accepted onto a PGCE (postgraduate certificate in education) course a year after completing my degree. I got cold feet, believing, correctly in my particular case, that I needed some more life experience. I went off to work in and eventually run a social enterprise. The experience of having my own children and taking them to playgroups and nurseries reminded me that I had wanted to teach, and reawakened a fascination with education. Living in an area of significant social deprivation, I was particularly motivated by a desire to do something about the very different and inequitable life chances that affect children at a very young age. I believe that if you can engage, encourage and help develop an enquiring mind in the primary years of education you might give that child some opportunities which otherwise might not be available to them. I feel that it is possible to engage and re-engage children whilst they are at primary school; the prospects for doing so diminish significantly in my view as children proceed through secondary school. With these beliefs in mind, I finally undertook my PGCE in primary years at a local college, some two decades after I had originally been accepted onto a PGCE course.

The school I worked in during my NQT (newly qualified teacher) year was a large local government-controlled primary school in an inner city. The school has a very socially deprived intake, and is located on a notorious estate. The children come from a wide range of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. The school has a positive focus on inclusion; it has a high number

of children who are considered to have special educational needs (SEN). Around half the pupils speak English as another language (EAL). Over half the pupils are entitled to free school dinners. The school's focus is very much on basic literacy and numeracy skills. Whilst the management pays lip service to the idea of a creative curriculum, this aspect of the school's work is very much secondary to the drive to get children to achieve good levels in reading, writing and maths. The school has a poor reputation amongst the local community. That reputation is largely based on snobbery because of the location of the school and concerns about behaviour and academic outcomes within the school.

My class was a Year 5 class. I was to discover later that it was considered quite challenging within the school. The children in the class had essentially been together since nursery, and had been taught for the previous two years by a very experienced teacher. They had a group ethos, but they also had complex relationships with each other, with issues between them which dated back years. The class was led by a group of highly intelligent girls whose intricate and volatile friendship issues were central to the dynamic of the class. They were a very talkative class; it was a struggle to keep the talk centred on the learning. Within the class there was a group of four boys who were designated as SEN pupils and who had problems remaining focused for more than 10 or 15 minutes. In addition, one girl had only arrived in England and begun to speak English within the last year. They were, although it would take me some time to realise it, a very likeable class.

I anticipated my NQT year to be tough. However, I wasn't prepared for just how extremely trying it would be. The school was expecting Ofsted at any day. Previous inspections had graded the school as 'satisfactory', which meant that another 'satisfactory' grading (or as it is now, an 'in need of improvement' grading) would send the school into special measures and would have been followed by an enforced academisation. A lot was resting on the inspection for the management of the school and for the local education authority (LEA). The data from the previous year weren't great and the feeling of pressure within the school was palpable from the beginning of September.

Masks and Dancing

I was ill prepared for setting up a classroom and getting the routines up and running. With a lot of the basics not in place, the class took a long time to settle down. The consequence of this was that it was made clear to me by the end of September that management was concerned about what was occurring in my classroom. A constant stream of senior managers 'popped in' as I worked. It felt as though they were judging me, not helping me. It didn't feel supportive. Until the School Improvement Officer (SIO) passed through my class one day and commented on the good things she saw, none of the senior management seemed able to see any of the positive activity going on in my classroom. The SIO focused on my questioning and the class discussion as areas of strength, which I was very pleased about.

I found the NQT year emotionally exhausting. There were highs: Black History Month assembly in October, where my class sang 'We Shall Overcome'. They enjoyed themselves and were proud of themselves. They were motivated by a real sense of anger and indignation about the treatment of African Americans in the USA before the civil rights movement. It was also the first time I really felt that we were working together, rather than against each other. The more the year went on, the more there were moments like that. The class were great at any kind of assembly or show. The group of girls who were de facto leaders of the class came into their own, and as long as we found a way to balance their egos, it was always a success. Each class has to present an assembly to the other classes in their Phase (in our case, this consisted of Year 5 and 6) about some aspect of their learning, with parents of the class members also invited to watch. A week before our class assembly, I was informed by a panicking senior manager that they thought it very likely that Ofsted would be in the following week and would want to see our assembly. The senior manager said they didn't want to worry me, but worry of course was what I did. And I shouldn't have. The class rose magnificently to the challenge. Several of my colleagues described this assembly as the best class assembly of the year. In it, a number of the class brought a scene from Shakespeare vividly to life. Then the whole class sang a version of one of Shakespeare's sonnets and finally a second group of the class re-enacted a fictionalised scene from Shakespeare's life. The topic had been chosen by the class and they all worked to make it a success.

Of course Ofsted didn't come that week and weren't there to see the assembly. Nor were any senior management. At the time that rankled; now all I remember is the assembly as a great moment of creativity and unity from the class. Two things became clear to me. The first was that by November the class had accepted me and the students would modify their behaviour when somebody (management, SIO, and finally Ofsted) walked in to the classroom. The second was that when the class were interested in a topic and were given space for some self-expression and creativity they gave their all, or at least the vast majority did. The class thoroughly enjoyed and excelled in recreating scenes from Bernie Doherty's *Street Child*, which we were using in literacy. At the conclusion of our geography topic on Venice we staged a Venetian Carnival complete with traditional Venetian dancing and Venetian masks which the children created during art. The tragedy was that the school's obsession with levels and data, and my lack of courage to stand up to this, led to a stifling focus on teaching to the test. I clearly remember one colleague reading me a news report about Mid Staffordshire hospital and replacing the name of the hospital with the name of our school. The points the article made about how the focus on targets had allowed overall care to collapse sounded exactly in line with our experience.

Data and Tears

The school places a huge emphasis on data, and consequently on the levels that the children 'achieve'. There was a lot of pressure put on all the Key Stage 2 teachers concerning the end-of-term tests. The tests for reading and maths were externally marked, whilst teachers used Assessing Pupil Progress (APP) and teacher assessment to level the writing. To my eternal shame I transmitted too much of the pressure that was being placed on me onto the children. A couple of weeks after the tests a colleague of mine who took some of the EAL children out of my class for additional support came to see me. She was very concerned. One of my pupils had burst into tears in her class, for she was sure that she had got a question wrong in her maths test, sure that she had done badly and sure that she wouldn't get the level she wanted. I felt truly awful when my colleague told me this. I resolved never to allow the pressure applied to me about levels and data to be transmitted to the pupils. The problem remains that the whole culture of the school is imbued with the myopic focus on levels, as, it seems, are large parts of primary education. The children will often describe themselves as a level. At the beginning of the year I, along with a number of my colleagues, fought against having class displays which showed the level individual children had achieved. Another effect of the obsession with levels and data at the school was the huge emphasis on sampling and providing evidence of the children's levels so that, should they not demonstrate the 'required progress' in the tests, we could make a teacher assessment and back it with evidence. This sampling essentially ensured that testing was happening weekly, thus applying more unnecessary pressure on the children.

I enjoyed my PGCE course immensely, and it taught me many useful things that I still draw on. But, as I have said, I feel I was under-prepared for my NQT year. And yet, I wonder whether it is possible to prepare for that experience? The aspects of teaching I felt ill prepared for were the nuts-and-bolts organisational issues that occur in a class: displays, lining-up orders, seating plans, the issues around moving around the class or to assembly. I don't know how you can teach those. I do think that my lack of consideration of these issues put me on the back foot. In the first few weeks I also struggled with behaviour management. A liberal by inclination, I failed to ensure a consistent attitude to behaviour. The effect of this failure was that I ended up having to be harsher throughout the year, much to my own unhappiness. Looking back, I think that the constant stream of managers coming into my class in those early weeks made me paranoid about behaviour in my class, and this led me to chase an expectation of behaviour which was not one that I aspired to, nor one which was achievable for the class. I am sure that had I been consistent in the first place and remained relaxed about minor misdemeanours, both the class and I would have wasted less energy, and would have been happier.

My child attends the school where I work. The issues I have touched on about the focus and drives of the school in relation to results gave me pause for thought about the educational experiences my child was having. However, I reassured myself. I have a great deal of faith in my child's teacher, someone my

child adores. My child is also extremely happy in the school and is making progress. My partner, who has attended all the parents' evenings, said that over the years teachers have been somewhat bemused by my partner's lack of interest in the levels our child has achieved, and by her insistence on focusing instead on whether our child was happy and had friends. I suppose an attitude such as ours is easier when one's child is making good progress and presents as ahead of national expectations. But I would like to think that it would be the same should the child not be progressing so well. I feel that having children of a similar age to those I teach gives me an insight into the interests, desires and concerns of the children in my class. I try to treat all the children as I would want my own child treated. I also believe it gives me some understanding of the pressures and the concerns of the parents of the children in my class. I suspect that the fact that many of the parents know I have a child at the school gives them more confidence in me.

Looking Ahead: my second year and beyond

Ofsted finally came to the school in July and the experience was not as dreadful as I had been led to believe. I was observed and got 'good' grading. The school also achieved 'good', and the Sword of Damocles lifted. There were promises of loosening the reins and more creativity now we were free of the threat of Ofsted failure. Certainly this year there is a more relaxed atmosphere in the school and I have enjoyed the teaching more. My new class and I have had more fun than I managed with my old class. However, the myopic focus on levels and data remains. We are now told by management that children should progress by a whole level each year, which seems an unrealistic and unhelpful target.

I had hoped that the joint strike action by the NUT and NASUWT teachers' unions in October would lead to a genuine fight over conditions, but the failure to call additional action in the autumn term made it look as though the leadership of the unions viewed the strike as no more than a gesture. I would like to think that we might mount a serious campaign in the future over these issues. The workload at our school seems extreme. I work around ten-hour days in the school. I generally do around two hours' further work at home in the evening and work one full day of the weekends. This loading seems about average for my colleagues, too. I don't believe that teachers working these long hours can sustain a high level of good practice throughout a six- or seven-week half-term.

One of the strengths of the school was the collegiate support. Certainly, without my colleagues I wouldn't have got through the first term. One of the benefits of being part of a larger school was that I planned with (and was helped to find my feet by) the other teachers in my year. A learning mentor at the school spotted my struggles and gave me a great deal of help to get on top of behaviour management. Fortunately, he had a very similar ethos to my own

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and that made his advice much easier to act upon. He held all the children in high esteem and considered himself lucky to be working with them.

When I first considered becoming a teacher, a friend who had been a teacher recommended reading *How Children Learn* and *Why Children Fail* by John Holt. These texts remain a constant source of inspiration, but also a constant yardstick by which I measure my teaching. I often feel saddened by how far from my ideals much of my practice currently is. In my second year of being a teacher I continue to fight for my convictions: that children should always be treated with love and respect; that they learn through experience; that their learning is their own construction which is most powerfully created by themselves and their cohort; that talk is central to their creation of knowledge; and that their development of knowledge and of language go hand in hand. I try not to view children as a level, or describe them as lower, middle or higher. I aim to try to move my pedagogy closer to my ideal.

References

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