

The PGCE (Primary) Experience

A mixed methods case study

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Introduction

In order to become a teacher in a maintained school in England and Wales teachers must have qualified teacher status (QTS).

Routes to becoming a school teacher in England:

- Through undergraduate study (Bachelor of Arts with QTS) – 3 or 4 years;
- Through postgraduate study (Postgraduate Certificate in Education - PGCE) – 1 year.

Background to study

In my role at another university, I taught PGCE students who were training to become primary (elementary) school teachers (children aged between 3 and 11 years).

I noticed that a number of them would drop out of the programme before completion and this was a very emotional and distressing time for some of them. It was also costly in terms of time and resources for the students, the university and their placement schools.

I wanted to understand this and find out more.....

Research questions

Research question 1: How and to what extent are gender, age and undergraduate degree classification associated with a successful PGCE (Primary) programme outcome?

Research question 2: What is the lived experience of a group of student teachers enrolled on a PGCE (Primary) programme and how does this impact on their sense of attachment to or detachment from the programme and to primary school teaching as a career?

Research methodology

This mixed-methods case study adopted a quantitative methodology to explore patterns in student teachers' success in the gaining of qualified teacher status (QTS) and programme dropout. Data were collected from five cohorts of student teachers (n=705) enrolled on the one-year PGCE (Primary) programme between 2009 and 2013.

Then a descriptive phenomenological approach explored the 'lived experience' of a group of student teachers (n=8) enrolled on the 2013/14 cohort.

Quantitative

- Sample size (n=705)
- Data gathered over a five year period at one institution (2009-2014):
 - Gender
 - Age
 - Undergraduate degree classification
 - Programme outcome – gained qualified teaching status or dropped out

Findings

Statistical analysis revealed that both gender and age were statistically significant with regard to programme completion:

1. Male student teachers were 2.6 times less likely to remain on the programme than females
2. Older student teachers of both gender were less likely to remain on the programme than younger student teachers.

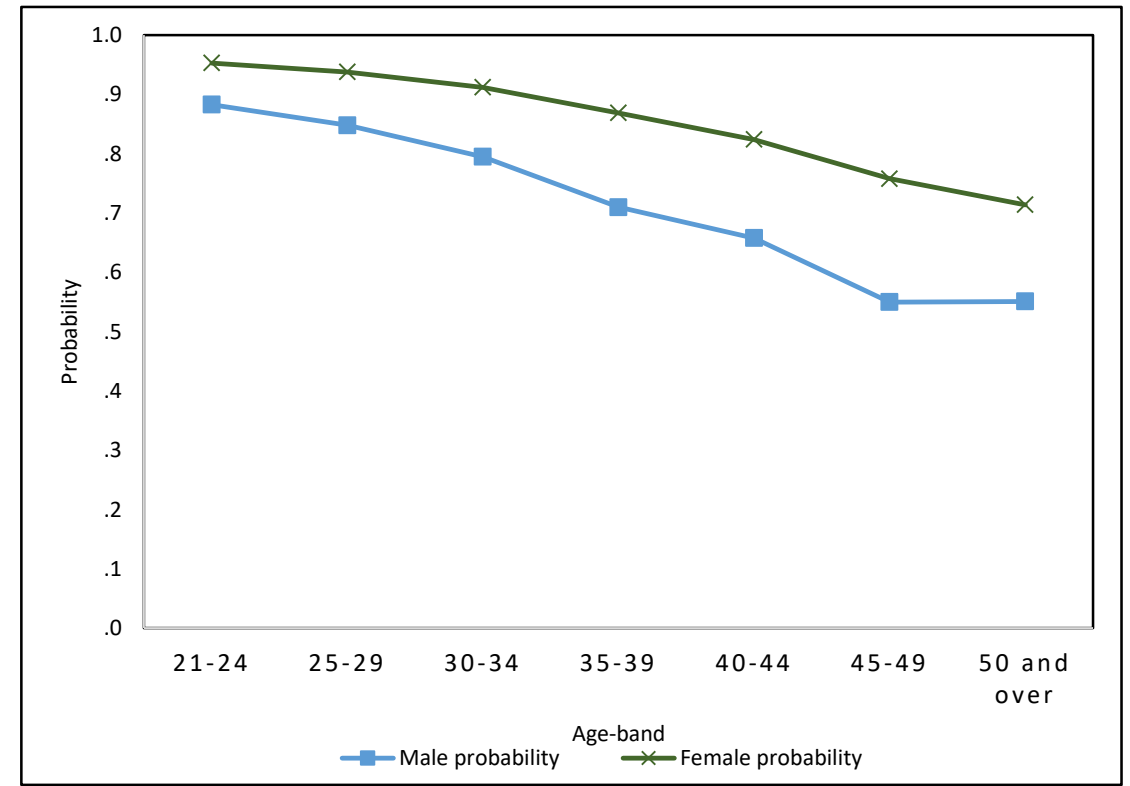
Undergraduate degree classification did not affect completion or dropout rates.

Probability of successful completion

The probability that a male would successfully complete the programme was less than females and as age increased both genders had a lower probability of success.

However, further analysis revealed that it was not possible to accurately predict any student's likelihood of success.

This led to the qualitative aspect of the study.



Qualitative

This follow on to the quantitative study used a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experience of the student teachers to try and better understand what might be contributing to programme dropout.

A self-selecting group of student teachers were interviewed at four points during their programme year:

At the beginning of the programme;

After their first school experience;

After their second school experience;

At the end of their programme.

Participant profile and interview schedule

Name	Gender	Age	1 st interview	2 nd interview	3 rd interview	4 th interview	Programme outcome
Andrew	Male	23	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Successful
Chloe	Female	23	Yes	Yes	Yes	No - declined	Successful
Edward	Male	24	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Successful
Amy	Female	25	Yes	Yes	Yes	No - declined	Successful
David	Male	27	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Successful
Karen	Female	27	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Successful
Jane	Female	43	Yes	Yes	Yes	No - dropped out before final placement	Dropped out
Susan	Female	44	Yes	No - dropped out before first placement	No	No	Dropped out

Examples of positive experiences

Participant reports	Participant
Feeling part of the team	Andrew, Amy, Chloe
Feeling supported	Andrew, Amy, Chloe, Karen
Sharing ideas and resources with others	Andrew, Amy
Feeling like staff wanted them to do well	Andrew, Amy
Receiving meaningful advice and feedback	Andrew, Amy
Feeling like they were making a difference to children's lives	Andrew, David, Edward
Beginning to feel like the teacher	Andrew, David, Edward

Examples of negative experiences

Participant reports	
Feeling like they had nothing in common with the staff in the school	Jane, Edward, David, Karen, Susan
Not being permitted to practise their ideas	Jane, Edward, David
School staff not being interested in them as a person	Karen, David, Edward, Susan
Being made to feel foolish	David, Jane
Feeling like they were 'stepping on toes'	David, Edward
Not having anyone to talk to	Jane, Karen, Edward
Not feeling like they were making progress	Jane, David, Edward, Susan
Feeling bullied	Edward, David

Overall

Susan and Jane reported finding it difficult to come to terms with the challenges to their personal beliefs and values they dropped out of the programme. Jane did not feel that she had the opportunity to practise becoming a teacher.

David and Edward reported significant challenges with relationships, bullying by staff and not feeling accepted in some of their school placements. Despite this, they did not drop out of the programme and went on to have very successful final placements.

Karen was successful but did not feel that she had a positive experience throughout her programme and always felt like *the student*.

Throughout their programme, Andrew, Chloe and Amy all formed positive relationships, felt supported and part of the team, and began feeling like *the teacher* from an early stage.

Findings

Phenomenological analysis revealed that the PGCE (Primary) experience was a complex interaction between three essential themes:

- Relationship formation;
- Feeling like a teacher;
- Coming to terms with challenges to personal identity and values.

These findings related well to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991).

Communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991)

This theory of social learning considers three aspects for the effective functioning of a community of practice:

- Shared goals;
- Relationship formation;
- Collaborative learning.

Furthermore, newcomers to a community of practice are regarded as 'legitimate peripheral participants' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.64).

When these elements are limited or lacking, the community of practice can become dysfunctional.

Communities of practice and the student teacher

Based on the accounts of the student teachers in my research, the PGCE (Primary) student experience can be thought of as a *temporary community of practice* (only there during the school experience period), and the student teachers new to the community are the *legitimate peripheral participants*.

The poor relationships, lack of shared goals and limited opportunities for shared learning are indicative of dysfunctionality.

Implications

Student teachers who experienced high levels of dysfunctionality in their teacher training programmes reported negative experiences that in *some* cases led to dropout.

However, those student teachers who remained focused on personal goals and came to terms with challenges to their own beliefs and values were successful despite this.

Recommendations for teacher training providers

1. Being mindful of the individual characteristics of student teachers is important. Characteristics that *can* lead to a higher risk of dropout are:
 - Being male
 - Being older
 - Find forming relationships more difficult
 - Have additional personal responsibilities.
2. Taking steps to avoid dysfunctionality within the teacher training community of practice by supporting schools to develop shared goals with their students, helping them to recognise opportunities for shared learning and ensuring relationship formation is genuine and supportive.

References