

# Educating geographers to 'Teach First'

*In this overview of the Teach First route into secondary school geography, Teach First programme leader Mary Fargher explores the role of the university in educating geographers to 'Teach First'.*

As geography teachers and educators we have become used to seeing student teachers arrive in schools in September from a variety of different training backgrounds, including PGCE, School Direct (salaried and unsalaried), School-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) and Teach First.

For those who may not be fully familiar with the Teach First route, this article aims to offer a fuller geographical perspective on the process, identifying similarities with and differences from other routes into ITE. Teach First centres on a partnership between universities, schools and the Teach First organisation. It aims to support high-quality graduates in pursuing a teaching career in schools where educational disadvantage is a key characteristic, and a condition for acceptance on the Teach First programme is the participant's real commitment to turning around educational disadvantage ([www.teachfirst.org.uk](http://www.teachfirst.org.uk)). My experience of working on the programme is that developing participants' geography subject knowledge in tandem with the Teach First vision of ITE is crucial to their success.

At the University of London Institute of Education (UCL IOE), our support of Teach First geographers begins in the year before they join us to study for a PGCE. All Teach First participants complete a curriculum knowledge audit (CKA) during the intensive application process, and our job is to review each audit from the perspective of both geography and pedagogy. We use the CKA to discuss and approve action plans for each participant.

The university-based course begins in early September, when geography subject specialists spend six weeks preparing for their first days in the classroom; this 'Summer Institute' is followed up during their PGCE year with further training at the university. Like other ITE students, Teach First participants complete a PGCE but then go on to receive newly qualified teacher (NQT) status in the same placement school.

During the six weeks participants become used to long but productive days in their home university, working together on the theory underpinning the geography curriculum and pedagogy. In their school-centred learning they observe good and outstanding practice and plan and teach a sequence of geography lessons. They receive feedback on the latter from university geography tutors and school-based mentors. At the same time, participants receive intensive support on classroom and behavioural management from university professional tutors and school-based mentors.

During the Summer Institute and throughout the following year, subject development days at their home university develop participants' knowledge

of key topics, including geography-specific and broader curriculum theory; development and planning; pedagogy; special educational needs provision; assessment and progression; and numeracy and literacy in geography.

Our role, as with other forms of ITE, also involves visiting Teach First participants in school, observing and feeding back on their teaching. The difference for those of us on the Teach First route is that as subject tutors we focus on geography and curriculum knowledge, while our professional tutor colleagues concentrate on classroom and behavioural management.

The role of research in ITE is crucial to the geography Teach First route. For example, geographers at UCL IOE are currently taking part in GIS-based research aimed at exploring better ways of supporting the use of GIS in school geography, and Teach First participants are using online GIS to develop both class and fieldwork student activities. One activity took place on the ninth-floor roof at UCL IOE, when the geographers used ArcGIS Online to map microclimates via their mobile phones. ESRI's simple story mapping technique enables the student teachers to produce high-quality interactive maps in their teaching.

Another key element of the Teach First route is the importance of Masters level study in their PGCE qualification. Participants are expected to carry out a classroom-based geographical investigation that is both theoretically underpinned and empirically rigorous. My experience over the past year has been that this is an area in which Teach First participants really shine. The opportunity to apply their considerable academic ability to their growing classroom experience leads to the production of some very impressive assignments which they can then apply to their classroom practice.

As my fourth year leading the Teach First geography programme at UCL IOE comes to a close I am mindful of the challenges for participants: the intensity of the Summer Institute; the need to be classroom-ready for September; the challenges of coping with a very full teaching timetable while undertaking a full PGCE, often in schools facing considerable economic and social disadvantage.

On the other hand, my dominant memories are of the highlights: supporting very well-qualified geographers who are committed to making a difference. The feedback on their contribution to our partner schools has been very positive. Four years on, many of our Teach First alumni are taking leading roles, both in promoting high-quality geography within their departments and beyond the department. | **TG**

Dr Mary Fargher is a Lecturer in Geography Education and the Programme Leader MA Geography in Education and Teach First Geography at the University College London Institute of Education.

Email: [m.fargher@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:m.fargher@ioe.ac.uk)

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