

A Brief Guide to the PGCE year for Neurodivergent Student Teachers

A personal and professional guide to success and wellbeing during the PGCE year when you are neurodivergent

Florence Neville and Simon Neville

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Introduction

It is estimated that 1 in 5 people are neurodivergent and this ratio appears to be reflected in the teaching workforce. Neurodivergence includes (but is not limited to) autism, ADHD, dyscalculia, dyslexia, dyspraxia, OCD and Tourette's. Most neurodivergent people are multiply neurodivergent, and distinctions between neurodivergent 'types' often overlap.

As a neurodivergent student teacher, you will be joining a workforce that includes many successful and fulfilled neurodivergent teachers. However, this does not mean that the education system is well designed, supportive of, or even informed about neurodiversity and neurodivergent people.

Unfortunately, neurodivergent teachers tend to have a more difficult time developing and maintaining a career path because of structural and day-to-day disabling factors within the school structure and environment.

Neurodivergent teachers are just as competent as their peers, but the school structure and environment are highly likely to cause more difficulties for them than for the estimated 4 in 5 teachers who are neurotypical.

Ideally, schools and universities would already understand and reduce the structural, social and sensory barriers that disable neurodivergent student teachers. Realistically, this is not yet the case. So, we designed this quick and easy guide to help you understand and reduce some of the barriers for yourself. This guide should help you:

- understand some of the challenges of the PGCE year
- improve professional relationships with your teachers and mentors
- understand how to get the best out of your course and placements
- reduce your risk of absence and burnout.

We understand that you may have positive, negative or ambivalent feelings about being neurodivergent, and that you may have understood your neurodivergent identity for years or are only just learning about it. Feeling positive and realistic about your neurodivergence is likely to benefit your PGCE experience. We hope that you find this guide easy and quick to understand and implement, wherever you are on your neurodivergent journey.

Neurodivergence and disability in educational settings

The Neurodiversity Paradigm frames differences in how people's minds work as both natural and beneficial to society. The Social Theory of Disability frames disability as a result of structural barriers, rather than inherent faults within an individual person.

Practitioners working within the Neurodiversity Paradigm and the Social Theory of Disability do not consider neurodivergent people to be disordered or burdensome. Rather, they consider how societal structures – such as the workplace – create unnecessary disabling barriers for neurodivergent people.

When neurodivergent differences are desired and supported, neurodivergent people are likely to thrive at home, socially, and in the workplace.

When neurodivergent differences are not desired or supported, neurodivergent people will experience increased disability and will be less likely to thrive at home, socially and in the workplace.

This guide focuses on aspects of the PGCE that are particularly challenging for autistic, ADHD and/or dyspraxic student teachers, but you will notice that the information and recommendations we offer are transferrable to other neurodivergent teachers.

Autistic Teachers

Autistic teachers tend to experience, process and respond to sensory and social information differently from teachers who are not autistic. Not better, not worse, just differently.

However, in university and school environments, autistic teachers tend to experience more overwhelm from social and sensory factors than people who are not autistic.

Sensory overload can result from bright or flickering lights, loud and unexpected noises, background noise, strong smells, and extreme temperatures.

Social overload can result from translating, processing and following neurotypical or cross-neurotype communication and social preferences.

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Social and sensory overwhelm is also common for ADHD, dyspraxic and OCD teachers.

Overwhelm can cause co-ordination challenges, communication challenges, dizziness, dysregulation, emotional distress, headaches, fatigue, frustration, illness, insomnia, nausea, pain, reduced executive functioning, and more.

When factors that contribute to overwhelm are reduced, you will have more energy to focus, regulate and teach effectively. Being able to identify and communicate these factors to your mentors will help you work together in reducing them.

ADHD Teachers

ADHD teachers tend to have different patterns of focus and activity and are motivated differently than teachers who are not ADHD. Not better, not worse, just differently.

However, in school environments, ADHD teachers tend to have more difficulties with physical and mental regulation than teachers who are not ADHD.

Mental regulation challenges can include switching focus from one activity or train of thought to another, engaging when unfocused, and disengaging when focused.

Physical regulation challenges can include a need for physical movement to be able to think, focus and stay calm, and challenges with physical inertia (being unable to move from one place to another, or to start an activity).

Mental and physical regulation challenges are also common for autistic and dyspraxic teachers.

Dysregulation can cause co-ordination challenges, communication challenges, emotional distress, embarrassment, fatigue, frustration, insomnia, overwhelm, reduced executive functioning, and more.

When factors that contribute to dysregulation are reduced, you will have more energy to focus, regulate and teach effectively. Being able to identify and communicate these factors to your mentors will help you work together in reducing them.

Dyspraxic Teachers

Dyspraxic teachers tend to experience, process and respond to sensory and temporal information differently from people who are not dyspraxic. Not better, not worse, just differently.

However, in school environments, dyspraxic teachers are more likely to have difficulties with physical and temporal co-ordination than people who are not dyspraxic.

Physical co-ordination challenges can include navigating messy or crowded rooms, multi-tasking, visual tracking, speech, and handwriting.

Temporal co-ordination challenges can include remembering and following sequences, diary management and time management.

Physical and temporal co-ordination challenges are also common for autistic, ADHD dyscalculic and dyslexic teachers.

Reduced co-ordination can cause accidents, communication challenges, dizziness, dysregulation, emotional distress, headaches, fatigue, frustration, insomnia, nausea, overwhelm, reduced executive functioning, and more.

When co-ordination challenges are reduced, you will have more energy to focus, regulate and teach effectively. Being able to identify and communicate these challenges to your mentors will help you work together in reducing them.

What you need to know about the PGCE year

The PGCE year is unique. It will test your ability to:

- build professional relationships with people in a wide variety of roles
- meet multiple and overlapping deadlines (including ITAP tasks, subject based tasks, master's level assignments, and teaching practice assessment points)
- play many different roles (student, colleague, and teacher)
- transition to many new timetables and environments (university and placements)
- accept and respond positively to continual feedback from multiple sources (university tutors, general mentors, professional tutors and the subject teachers you work with).

Most student teachers, but particularly ADHD, autistic and dyspraxic teachers, find the process of adapting to and managing these deadlines, roles, environments and feedback highly challenging. But the process is necessary to successfully complete the year and become a qualified teacher. In this guide, we suggest how to manage these potentially tricky aspects of the PGCE, but ultimately you will need to identify what your own key challenges are and work out how best to address them.

Building professional relationships

Many neurodivergent people worry that disclosing their accessibility needs will make them look less professional. However, part of building a professional identity, is building professional relationships, including those with your personal tutor and general mentors. Strong professional relationships are vital to reducing disability in your PGCE year and helping you to thrive, both personally and professionally.

In this guide we focus on building professional relationships with your personal tutor and general mentors, because these are the people you will have the most one-to-one contact with. It is worth remembering that these people are likely to be stretched for time and energy, across multiple teaching, mentoring and personal responsibilities. They may have a little or a lot of knowledge about neurodiversity, and they may be neurodivergent themselves.

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To help your tutor and mentors to help you, you will need to:

1. Clearly and concisely identify and explain what your challenges are
2. Clearly and concisely identify and describe the support and networks you can access for yourself
3. Clearly and concisely ask for the support you need from them, in a timely manner.

Building a professional relationship with your personal tutor

We recommend emailing your personal tutor to make a short online or in-person appointment at the earliest opportunity (either before the start of the course, or in the first couple of weeks). If you aren't sure how to begin this conversation you can try this email template:

"Dear [first name]. I am in your tutor group this year and would like to briefly discuss some concerns I have about managing the PGCE year as a neurodivergent student. Please could we have a twenty-minute appointment at your earliest convenience? Many thanks, [your name]"

Before the meeting put together a short list for each of the following three areas:

1. The specific concerns you have (e.g. wellbeing, managing deadlines, managing transitions, building networks, keeping up with course reading)
2. The support and networks you have already put into place for yourself (e.g. family support, counselling, GP appointments, sport or interest groups etc.)
3. The support you would like from the university (e.g. wellbeing services, disability services, slide-decks given in advance of lectures).

Take this list to your appointment to help structure your discussion. It may be helpful to provide your tutor with a copy during or after the appointment.

Either you or your tutor should email the other with a summary of the meeting so that you have a copy of what you talked about, what you agreed, and what needs to be actioned. During the meeting, you should agree on who will write this email, and when it will be done.

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Building a professional relationship with your general mentor

At least a week in advance of your teaching placement, you should have some contact with your general mentor. We recommend that you send a brief email explaining any immediate accessibility needs you have. If you like, you can use the following as a template

“Dear [insert name]

I am looking forward to beginning my placement at [school name]. So that I am prepared for my first week I would be grateful if you could email me the following information [delete items as necessary]

- Information about public transport / parking
- A map of the school building(s) and clear photographs of key areas such as teaching space(s) I will be working in
- Details of where and when I should turn up on my first day
- A phone number to call/text in case I run into difficulties or can't make the first day
- The expected dress code (specific to the school and department)
- A brief guide to the school's behaviour policies and expectations (a brief guide, not the whole document).

Best wishes, [insert name]”

Having this information should help you plan how to reduce overwhelm, find ways to regulate, and co-ordinate your movements in and around the school from the first day.

On the first day of placement, you may want to let your mentor know what your specific accessibility needs are. We recommend that you write a list like the one above:

1. The specific concerns you have (e.g. sensory overwhelm, prioritising planning v. marking, managing energy levels, physical co-ordination challenges etc.)
2. The support and networks you have already put into place for yourself (e.g. university wellbeing services, disability services, time management phone apps, screen readers, earplugs etc.)
3. The support you would like from the school (e.g. a quiet room to use in case of overwhelm, written formative feedback as well as verbal feedback, the autonomy to turn off lighting if light sensitive, access to e-textbooks etc.)

Meeting deadlines

You will have many deadlines in your PGCE year and some of these will overlap. ITAP tasks, subject based tasks, master's level assignments, and teaching practice assessment points will take place at multiple points in the year, and it can be difficult to juggle them all.

Although you can request extensions for some deadlines, we don't recommend it because you will still have to complete everything by the end of the academic year. Trying to catch up with late deadlines can (1) cause far more stress than meeting the original deadlines, (2) risk qualifying by the end of the year, and (3) risk your chances of starting employment in September.

Most universities offer support for students who find managing their workload particularly challenging. In the first instance, it is a good idea to work with your university's disability services to help you break down assignments into manageable 'chunks' that work around your lectures, placements and other assignments.

If you need help signing up with disability services, ask your personal tutor to contact them on your behalf.

If you are struggling to meet a deadline, speak to your personal tutor as soon as possible. They will be able to help you prioritise what needs to be done to meet that deadline and/or explain how you request an extension.

Playing different roles

It can be confusing juggling the different roles you will play in your PGCE year (student, colleague and teacher) but it is important to manage these in an appropriate and professional manner.

As a student you will need to:

- apply the academic and subject based skills that you learned in your undergraduate degree
- take responsibility for your own learning
- follow advice and direction from the tutors and mentors you are in contact with.

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As a colleague you will need to:

- support and complement the work done by other students and the teachers you work with in placements
- be a team player in multiple communities (other students, subject area, school tutor systems etc.)
- share the practicalities of university and teaching placements (e.g. lift sharing, looking out for each other's wellbeing, supporting each other with assessments etc.).

As a teacher you will need to:

- take responsibility for the learning and wellbeing of your students
- turn up to school every day
- always be the adult in the room.

During the year you may need to come back to this list and assess for yourself whether you are meeting these targets. If you feel that you are not managing these multiple roles, consider asking your personal tutor and/or your general mentor for advice.

New timetables

You will need to transition to many new timetables at university and your placements. This can be disorienting and overwhelming for many neurodivergent trainee teachers. We suggest you try using multiple methods of helping you to manage and stay on track, as the online timetables offered by most universities can be confusing and difficult to access.

Creating handmade visual timetables on paper may be helpful, as can synchronising your university online calendar to your personal online calendar. Multiple reminder notifications for deadlines may also be useful (e.g. a week before, a day before, and a few hours before). However, if any of these methods are not helpful, put them to the side; you don't want them to overwhelm you.

Staying in touch with course mates is also useful. Group chats or regular meetups are a good chance to remind each other what's happening and when it's happening. Building a network with your course mates is valuable on many levels.

New environments

By new environments, we mean new sensory, social and structural environments. Some of you will not find these transitions particularly challenging, but for others it can be difficult to adapt.

Knowing what to expect is important if you struggle with new sensory environments. Using the email template we offered under the heading “building a professional relationship with your general mentor” should be helpful. You may also consider creating a sensory toolkit to take with you. If you haven’t already experimented with a sensory toolkit, try:

- Earplugs or noise-reducing headphones
- Dark glasses or blue-light blocking glasses
- Fidget toys
- Essential-oil roll-on blends

If you find adapting to new social environments challenging, use the recommendations we have given under “building professional relationships” and “playing different roles” to help you adapt. Your tutors and mentors may also be able to offer helpful advice here.

If you find transitioning to new structural environments difficult, the email template we offered under the heading “building a professional relationship with your general mentor” should be helpful. You can also try using the recommendations we have given under the heading “new timetables”. If you are still having difficulties, ask your personal tutor and/or general mentor for advice.

Responding to feedback from multiple sources

Anything less than glowing feedback can be challenging for many neurodivergent student teachers. Neurodivergent people often have a difficult history of being told that they are doing things wrong (rather than differently). When you are trying your hardest to be a good student, colleague and teacher, advice meant to be helpful can often feel like a personal attack.

Additionally, feedback will often seem confusing, contradictory and contrary. But acting appropriately on professional feedback from your tutors, mentors and colleagues is an integral part of the PGCE year. By this, we mean acting respectfully (even if you don’t feel

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respect for the person or the advice given) and demonstrating a willingness to act on the feedback given (even if you don't agree with it).

All student teachers come to the PGCE year with values based on being a school pupil. Sometimes it may feel as if you are being asked to ignore your values during the PGCE. These values may include:

- wanting to support pupils who struggle as you did at school
- wanting to create a fully inclusive classroom environment
- wanting to offer information in the way you wanted to be offered information
- wanting to pass on a deep love for your subject.

These are all fantastic values, and they may be shared by your tutors, mentors and colleagues. But your tutors, mentors and colleagues also have years of combined experience and expertise in teaching. And they will have a good understanding of what you need to evidence in a very short space of time to pass your PGCE and join the teaching profession.

We have seen many neurodivergent student teachers struggle through the PGCE because they put their values above passing the course. Once you are qualified and have a teaching post, you can weave your values into your teaching practice. If you want to put your values into practice, you need to be employed. And to be employed you need to be qualified.

Here are some tips on managing the feedback process:

- Always thank your tutor, mentor or colleague for feedback (even if you don't like it).
"Thank you for explaining how I can do better."
- Always write the feedback down and ask them to clarify if you have understood the feedback accurately. "I think you said I need to do [brief summary]; can you clarify if I have understood that correctly?"
- Consider asking for feedback to be given in a written format so that you have time to process it and respond appropriately.
- Be proactive. Before the next assignment or observed lesson ask them to check that you have responded as they wanted "Last week you recommended I do [brief summary], I am going to focus on that today, even if it means I don't meet other criteria. Please would you watch for this specifically?"

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As feedback is continuous throughout the PGCE, you may find that you can use the above tips in a cyclical manner. By being polite, responsive and proactive you can maintain some control over how feedback is framed.

If you become confused and overwhelmed by the feedback you are given, you can ask your tutor, mentor or colleague to give you just one thing to focus on at a time. “I am finding it difficult to juggle everything, please would you tell me what to focus on right now, for instance, classroom management, or timekeeping, or checking learning? Then I can build on that in future lessons.”

Managing your wellbeing during the PGCE year

Although it may feel difficult juggling your wellbeing with passing the PGCE, your wellbeing is a priority and cannot be put to the side while you complete the year.

Support networks

Under the heading “building professional relationships” we recommended that you tell your tutor about the support and networks you have already put into place. If you haven’t already, it is important to start building these networks as soon as possible. Your list may include:

- support from your family (childhood or chosen)
- support from the university’s wellbeing services
- support from your GP
- regular counselling
- sport clubs that meet regularly
- special interest groups that meet regularly.

If you need help signing up with wellbeing services, ask your personal tutor to contact them on your behalf.

Planning time off

You will need to take regular time away from teaching, learning, planning and emails, even if you feel like you are behind in your work. Taking regular time off will help reduce overwhelm, maintain physical, emotional and mental self-regulation, and support your health and wellbeing. In turn, this will make your work more focussed and efficient.

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Some people prefer to prioritise an hour or two off every day and others a half-day or full day every week. Do not wait until holiday times to take time off.

Use your time off however you like - exercise, reading, TV, gaming, catching up with friends, journalling, being creative, baking, being in nature - whatever works for you.

Health and wellbeing essentials

We have noticed that neurodivergent students who struggle with the course and/or their wellbeing often de-prioritise the following daily practices:

- drinking water or other non-caffeinated drinks
- eating nourishing food (at least twice a day, ideally more)
- sleeping
- movement (not necessarily formal exercise, can just be walking or stretching)
- being outside
- maintaining personal cleanliness and hygiene.

These practices are essential. If you are not managing them every day, it is important that you seek support from others before your health and wellbeing start to deteriorate.

When things go wrong

The advice we have given in this booklet will help you to complete your PGCE and maintain your wellbeing. But things may still go wrong along the way; unforeseen challenges are common during the PGCE year.

If you sense that things are starting to spiral out of your control it is vital that you speak to your university tutors as soon as possible. If you are not sure how to do this, you can use the following email template:

“Hi [insert name]

I am currently struggling with [poor mental health/managing my workload/overwhelm]. I have already contacted the university wellbeing services and/or disability services and would like to talk to you as soon as possible to discuss my options. Please let me know when we can meet in-person or online.

Best wishes [insert name]”

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Your tutor may suggest one or more the following

- discuss your workload with your general mentor
- suspend studies
- withdraw from the course.

Suspending studies may have significant logistical implications and financial implications, and if you withdraw from the course, it is unlikely that you will be able to re-apply to another university for a PGCE. However, addressing the immediate workload is not always enough to resolve the situation.

Even with the best intentions, ability and support, not everybody is able to complete a PGCE. Your mental health and wellbeing should always be a priority.

Having good support systems and being proactive in managing your health and wellbeing will make it more likely that you will complete the PGCE and go on to have a rewarding career in teaching. We have met many excellent neurodivergent teachers who have successful careers in education. We hope that you will be one of them.

Questions about disclosure

Should I tell my tutors and mentors that I am neurodivergent?

Ideally, yes. But the conversation cannot end there. Your neurodivergent identity is not enough to explain the unique way that you experience, process and respond to information, or what your accessibility needs are.

Should I tell my colleagues that I am neurodivergent?

There's no easy answer to this. In a supportive and understanding social environment disclosing a neurodivergent identity may be helpful. In a social environment that does not understand neurodiversity, support neurodivergent teachers, or appreciate the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce, it may be personally and professionally dangerous in terms of stigma, bullying and career prospects. Talk to your tutor to help assess your placement schools but ultimately decide for yourself.

Useful terms to know

A quick online search will help you learn more about each of these terms.

Executive function A range of abilities that rely on emotional and physical regulation and co-ordination. Executive functioning is adversely affected by external factors such as sensory and social overwhelm and a lack of resources to self-regulate.

Identity-first language A value-neutral way of describing part of someone's identity (e.g. autistic person), as opposed to person-first language (e.g. person with autism) which assumes that the identity is negative and somehow separate from the person.

Meltdown A crisis response to acute overwhelm (which should not be confused with anger or a tantrum).

Neurodivergent A value-neutral way to describe a person whose mind works substantially differently from around 4 in 5 of the general population.

Neurodiverse A group of people with different neurotypes (an individual cannot be neurodiverse, only a group of people can be neurodiverse).

Neurodivergent burnout A state which may look like anxiety, depression or workplace burnout, but is actually a long-term and highly disabling response to chronic overwhelm.

Neurotype A way of labelling someone's mind type (such as Autistic, ADHD, neurodivergent, neurotypical etc.).

Neurotypical A value-neutral way to describe someone who's mind works similarly to around 4 in 5 of the general population.

Shutdown A crisis response to acute overwhelm (which should not be confused with sulking or rudeness).

Stimming Using preferred physical or vocal movements, or using 'fidget toys' to self-regulate, improve focus, distract from pain or overwhelm, and/or increase joyful feelings.

About us

Simon and Florence are lecturers with many years of combined knowledge and experience in the field of neurodiversity and education. Simon, who is autistic, has twenty years of secondary classroom teaching experience and an overlapping seventeen years of tutoring and mentoring student teachers. Florence, who is autistic and dyspraxic, has been researching and training organisations about neurodivergent wellbeing for several years, and has a PhD in autistic wellbeing. Together we run workshops on neuro-inclusivity in the classroom, and on supporting neurodivergent student and early career teachers.

Find out more about neurodiversity: <https://florenceneville.com/resources/> Links to resources on neurodivergence and inclusivity

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