

## Doesn't an apprentice lay bricks?

By Alex Kendal

6:53am. 2019. My plane touches down at Manchester airport and that's it – I've decided – I'm never stepping foot in a classroom again!

Despite being the most incredible adventure and allowing me to see some amazing parts of the world, teaching in China was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Think British schools circa-1900 and you'd probably be pretty close in your estimations; children sitting in rows, a learn-by-rote style of teaching and a speak only when you're spoken to ethos of behaviour management. Couple this alien world with the inability to speak a word of Mandarin and you can perhaps begin to understand why it was tough going.



So, here I was. Back in the UK after a year abroad with no idea what to do next! I had always thought I'd be a teacher throughout my own time at school, aspiring to be like those members of staff that I'd so looked up to. (Admittedly, I was a bit of a teacher's pet – I know that anyone who knows me will find that *incredibly* hard to believe!) Yet, I felt somewhat unenthused by education and all thoughts of being *Mr Kendal* fled from my mind.

Fast forward 2 years, a stint living in London, managing a theatre and a Master's degree, and who'd have guessed that "COVID" would even have been in our vocabulary. The pandemic had forced the closure of so many establishments, my theatre included, and so I found myself somewhat bereft. This was akin more to the post-A-Level teenager with no idea what to do than the well-put-together, 20-something that I believed I should be. (Between you and me, I still only feel about 12 most days – how I get 11-year olds to listen to me is anyone's guess!)

Luckily (and I don't honestly think I knew how lucky I was at the time), I was employed at Peckover Primary School as an Academic Mentor during the government's push to get children back into schools. And that was it. My love for teaching returned and, more than that, it was greater than ever before. It was this new-found drive and passion for teaching that made me agree to begin a teaching apprenticeship in September 2021. In my mind, "apprentices" were always builders, plumbers and electricians; I'd never heard of a *teaching* apprentice before! Guided by my wonderful mentor, it was an incredibly steep learning curve and whilst there were astounding highs and, what I have come to call "I love my job" days, there were also sweeping lows and "Am I sure I'm doing the right thing?" days. Now, I'm not going to outline in excruciating detail the process of teacher training as I'm sure that many people who are reading this have either been there themselves, are currently in the throes of the wonderful process, or have known someone who's been through it, but I will

recall an anecdote of my training year that encapsulates that “How brilliant is this?/Why on Earth am I doing this?” mentality:

Picture the scene: it’s the middle of November and I’m standing on a spit of land in the North Sea with 46 moaning 11-year olds. “I’m cold...my feet are sore...when’s lunch?” they continuously complain as we trudge through the mud, barefoot, across the estuary of a tidal river. “Keep going,” I reply, “What an amazing experience this is!”...all the while secretly thinking: “God, it’s cold...I *can’t* actually feel my feet...I wonder when lunch actually is...” not that I’d ever admit that to them! Returning to dry land and putting back on our socks and shoes (well, after we’d wiped off our muddy feet with our socks), the rest of the group made their way back to the town for lunch. I, meanwhile, remained behind, with a dutiful (and unreservedly patient) TA, while one of our pupils struggled to put his socks and shoes back on. Year 6, for us, is all about developing the children’s independence and life skills so, fast-forward 20 (agonising) minutes later, and the child had managed to independently secure his laces and we headed back to the group. On the way, the child decided they were a little cold and wanted to put their gloves on...cue another 10 minutes of to-ing, fro-ing (and a few tears), and we’d finally encouraged them enough that they managed to put their gloves on. Arriving back at the town centre, I couldn’t quite explain the sense of pride and triumph I felt that this child, who was known to have some fine motor difficulties, had managed to complete both tasks by himself. However, those feelings of accomplishment were quickly shattered by a call from the visit leader of: “Right, everyone – gloves off! Time for some hand sanitiser...” I cannot begin to tell you the amount of non-school-appropriate words that went through my head at that moment! Despite this, every time this particular child had to put his own gloves on, he managed to do it independently, knowing he was capable. Don’t get me wrong - I don’t think this child will ever become the Usain Bolt of glove putting-on, but for him, this was a real moment of achievement!

Training as a teaching apprentice means teaching 80% of the time, whilst also doing all of the PGCE essays, paperwork and evidence gathering expected of a more traditional, university-based PGCE. It is, I suppose, the teaching equivalent of a baptism of fire, but I wouldn’t have done it any other way. The things I learned “on the job”, not just in placement schools but in my own school, with my own class, forming bonds with them and navigating their behaviours, home lives and relationships, taught me more, I think, than lectures or seminars ever could. I always wanted to be a teacher. Then, I really didn’t. Now, I can’t think of doing anything else. Having qualified as a teacher in July 2021 and now working as a first year ECT, I maintain that It is simultaneously the most amazing (and most infuriating) thing I think I’ve ever done and, although I may be in a small handful of people with this opinion - I suppose I have to say “Thank you, COVID,” because without it (and its bizarre couple of years), I’d never have ended up here.

*Alex*