Becoming a Teacher of Early Reading- a Reading Teacher

Helen Hendry

We know that passionate and knowledgeable teachers of all age groups can inspire a love of reading in their pupils, but how do student teachers become confident 'Reading Teachers' ?

In my research with 7 early years PGCE students during their training year and their first term as NQTs, I investigated how their understanding and practice were shaped by contrasting school cultures for teaching early reading, mentor interactions, and guidance from their university-based tutors(Hendry 2020). I found they moved through a broadly similar continuum of development from 'Notice and Emulate', to ''Respond and Innovate' then 'Apply and Connect' and 'Extend and Augment' (Hendry 2016, 2020) Figure 1. However, whilst trainees gradually developed their teaching of reading, when in different schools they sometimes abandoned aspects of good practice that they had previously demonstrated. This 'uneven' trajectory was very much dependent on the role models in their school, dominant practices (including unquestioning reliance on prescriptive schemes) and opportunities to discuss pedagogy (or lack of these). Their focus in the early years was also most often on the technical elements of phonics rather than on pupils' motivation to read. Twistleton (2004, p163) noted that:

> An emphasis on order and curriculum in school may lead to social practices which close down the opportunities for engagement with knowledge.

In my research, the emphasis on working towards national expectations for phonics had limited interactions between mentors and students around other aspects of reading.

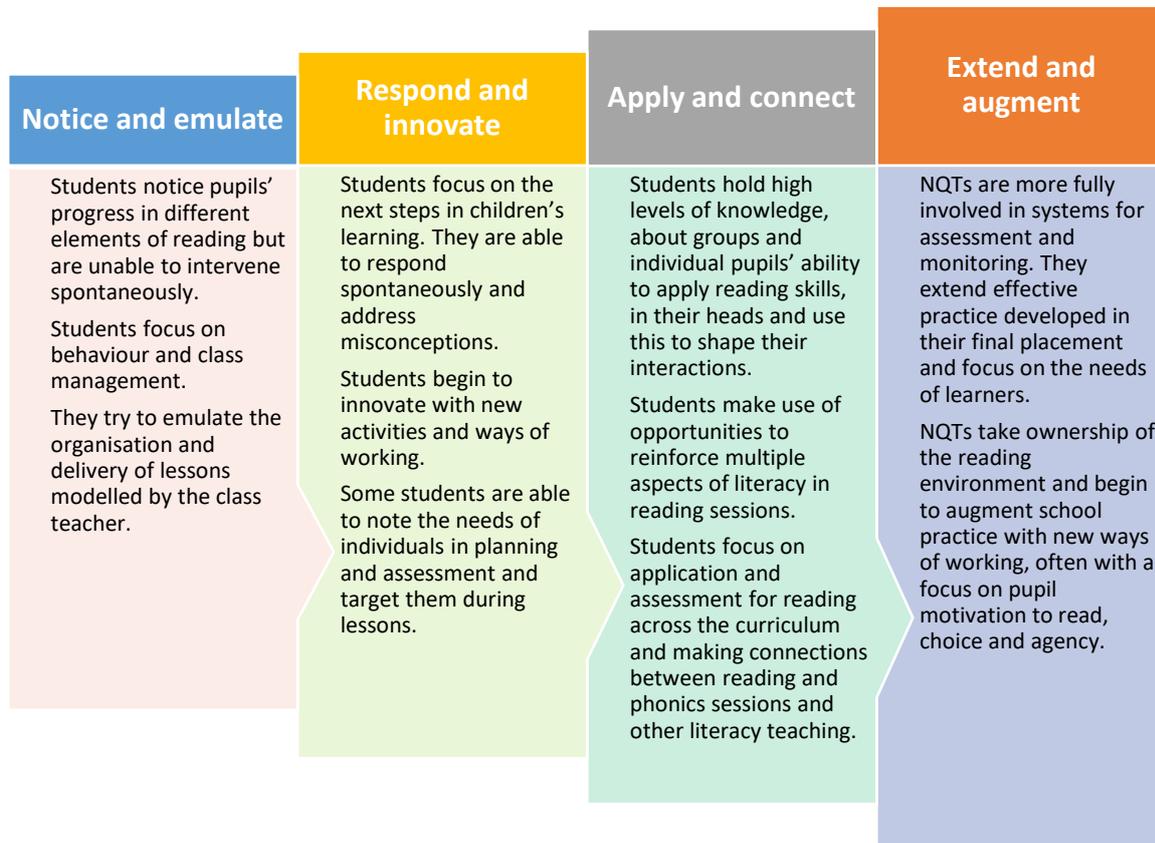| Notice and emulate	Respond and innovate	Apply and connect	Extend and augment
Students notice pupils' progress in different elements of reading but are unable to intervene spontaneously.	Students focus on the next steps in children's learning. They are able to respond spontaneously and address misconceptions.	Students hold high levels of knowledge, about groups and individual pupils' ability to apply reading skills, in their heads and use this to shape their interactions.	NQTs are more fully involved in systems for assessment and monitoring. They extend effective practice developed in their final placement and focus on the needs of learners.
Students focus on behaviour and class management.	Students begin to innovate with new activities and ways of working.	Students make use of opportunities to reinforce multiple aspects of literacy in reading sessions.	NQTs take ownership of the reading environment and begin to augment school practice with new ways of working, often with a focus on pupil motivation to read, choice and agency.
They try to emulate the organisation and delivery of lessons modelled by the class teacher.	Some students are able to note the needs of individuals in planning and assessment and target them during lessons.	Students focus on application and assessment for reading across the curriculum and making connections between reading and phonics sessions and other literacy teaching.	

Figure 1: A continuum of the development of understanding and practice for teaching early reading (adapted from Hendry 2016)

In common with prior research about experienced teachers of English and reading, the student teachers in my study were strongly influenced by their beliefs about reading (Poulson et al. 2001; Brooks 2007; Bingham and Hall-Kenyon 2013). However, my study also highlighted the impact of their research and academic reading on their pedagogy for reading. Hearteningly, the student teachers shared a belief that children should learn to love reading. This conviction was maintained throughout their training but was much more visible in practice once they had their own class as NQTs. In their first term as NQTs several of them had introduced new book corners, or mini-lending libraries for children to have the opportunity to make their own reading choices, instead of only interacting with decodable phonic reading books. This improvement on existing school practice stemmed from their conviction that choice and agency were part of reading for pleasure:

They need to enjoy it. If they don't enjoy it, they are just going to see it as a job that they don't want to be doing … And when a child learns to love reading and love books then they'll take that with them throughout their whole lives. (Natalie, student teacher)

The student teachers explained that these initial beliefs developed into a pedagogical stance through the accumulation of school experiences but also through the opportunity to carry out small scale classroom research and to read academic research and debate about teaching reading.

In line with student teachers and NQTs across subject disciplines (Caires et al. 2012; Hobson and Malderez 2013; Izadinia 2016), their experiences in school and mentoring relationships were also highly influential. However, in many of the schools I visited, the focus was so firmly on phonics that there was very limited dialogue between experienced teachers and their student colleagues about reading preferences, reading different media or promoting reading for pleasure. Although they had more freedom to introduce new ideas as NQTs, they were also often very isolated and felt without adequate guidance.

It seems that student teachers and NQTs, like children learning to read, benefit from being part of a community of readers. They need regular, informal dialogue with mentors about practice and pedagogy in reading, previously documented as the benefits of informal mentoring dialogue in ITE more generally (Gut et al. 2014). Student teachers and NQTs need a space to talk about book choices and pedagogy for teaching reading, ideally with their school-based mentor 'in the moment' of teaching decisions and after school, potentially in teachers' reading groups mirroring the practices developed the 'Teachers as Readers' project (Cremin et al. 2009). If this isn't available in a school, the wider communities of teachers who are proactive Reading Teachers and HE colleagues also involved in this network have much to contribute to support this development, through mechanisms such as Twitter chats, and student teachers' reading groups in HEIs.

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Her research interests include early literacy, reading and writing for pleasure, and teacher education. You can read more about her work here.