Raising the game: primary school mentors’ changing expectations of student teachers’ progression in English subject knowledge.

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Abstract
Evidence from a longitudinal study (2000-2007) of primary school mentors’ written comments on student teachers’ lessons indicates a shift in mentors’ expectations and conceptions of subject knowledge for primary student teachers.

An initial study of primary school mentors’ conceptions of subject knowledge in English was undertaken in the period 2000-2003 and included an analysis of mentors’ written comments concerning undergraduate students’ subject knowledge. These were analysed on a thematic basis and findings from this data were supported by interviews with primary mentors and tape recordings of post-lesson discussions between mentors and primary student teachers.

A further analysis of written comments using the same thematic framework was undertaken for the period 2004-2007 and shifts in emphasis are identified, in comparison with the earlier data. These continue the trend to emphasise pedagogical strategies, and knowledge of children as learners as an important aspect of English subject knowledge for intending primary teachers. Comparison with the earlier data suggests that these mentors’ expectations of primary student teachers are more demanding than in the period 2000-2003, and are more explicitly focused on the needs of pupils as learners, as opposed to an emphasis on curriculum delivery, which was more evident in the earlier period. Group interviews with primary teachers, using examples drawn from the data and the results of the thematic analysis, both test these conclusions and explore some possible reasons for these apparent shifts in emphasis and expectations of future primary teachers.

Introduction: the context of the original research study
The original study primary school mentors’ conceptions of subject knowledge in English commenced at a time when a profound intervention into the primary school curriculum in England and Wales was taking hold through the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (NLS,NNS) (DfEE 1998a, 1999). Initial Teacher Training (ITT) was undergoing related intervention in the shape of a centrally determined National Curriculum for ITT (ITT NC) (DfEE 1998b).

These three initiatives jointly reflected a more extensive intervention into curriculum and pedagogical approaches in primary education than had previously been experienced. There was a strong emphasis on primary teachers’ subject knowledge in English and mathematics, and also clear directives as to the ways in which literacy and numeracy should be taught. The ITT NC, provided as an appendix to DfEE Circular 4/98 (DfEE 1998b) specified the content of teacher training courses in English, mathematics, science and information communications technologies. Inspections of ITT by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED)
focused on English, mathematics and one other subject, and had far reaching consequences if the outcomes were unsatisfactory. The extent and nature of student teachers’ subject knowledge was thus potentially a critical issue for ITT.

Another central theme running through Circular 4/98, as with preceding Circulars, (24/89 DES 1989, 14/93 DfE 1993) was that of the role of schools working in partnership with Higher Education Institutions (HEI) providing ITT. Schools were to be directly involved in the development of ITT curricula, and the selection, training and assessment of prospective teachers. Consequently, a key figure in primary schools’ involvement in ITT was the school based mentor: an experienced teacher with designated responsibility for the professional development of one or more student teachers within their school. One of the most commonly used mentoring strategies was that of observation of student teachers’ lessons and provision of formative feedback, both verbally and through the completion of a written lesson observation form provided by the HEI. In the case of the HEI partnership within the initial study, this form included a specific section for reporting on evidence of student teachers’ subject knowledge and understanding, in line with the requirements of the ITT NC. Mentors’ written comments in this section of the form became one of the evidence bases for the study of their conceptualisation of students’ subject knowledge in English.

Subject knowledge and primary English
Although Shulman’s (1986) well-known knowledge bases for teaching have been both extended (Aubrey 1997, Turner-Bissett 2001) and challenged (Stones, 1994, Banks, Leach & Moon, 1996) his essential distinctions between subject matter knowledge or content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curriculum knowledge have remained influential, and formed the basis for the initial study. However, Shulman’s work was based upon secondary school teachers, and he and his collaborators were cautious about extending the framework to the primary (elementary) school context: ‘Some of our colleagues suggest that elementary teachers treat students and their characteristics as the starting point of instruction, rather than focusing on considerations of content, its comprehension and transformation. Other elementary educators assert the opposite’. (Wilson et al, 1987: 122-3)

This ‘opposing view’ was taken by policy makers in England and the belief that improving primary teachers’ subject matter knowledge would of necessity improve pupils’ achievement figured strongly in policy developments for Initial Teacher Training and the primary curriculum during the 1990s (Poulson 2001).

The Teacher Training Agency (TTA), commissioned two major research studies into effective teaching in literacy and numeracy prior to the full introduction of the NLS and NNS (Askew et al 1997, Medwell et al, 1998). In both studies, more effective teachers were able to help pupils make connections between different areas of mathematics or “between language at text, sentence and word levels” (Wray et al, 1999), through the use of appropriate pedagogical strategies, based on particular beliefs about the nature of the subject. Teachers identified as effective teachers of literacy did not necessarily have formal qualifications in English, and did not perform significantly better in tests related to literacy knowledge than a comparison group (Medwell et al 1998). However, they did perform much better when undertaking tasks contextualised in practical classroom situations, such as commenting on errors and strategies in children’s reading and writing (Poulson 2001). Thus, primary teachers’ subject matter knowledge for literacy appeared to be inextricably linked with pedagogical context and was, in Poulson’s term: functional - “they knew about, and taught
the features of language in use, but had greater difficulty with language as a system”, (Poulson 2001: 45). Similarly, Edwards’ and Ogden’s (1998) research into how curriculum subject knowledge was constructed in ITT challenged Shulman’s concept of pedagogical content knowledge as representing an external body of knowledge, rather than a situated knowledge “evidenced in action rather than in explanation” (op cit :737).

The introduction of the NLS had an immediate impact on the teaching of English – or literacy as it rapidly came to be called. The wholesale introduction of highly structured training and a continuing stream of supporting materials, coupled with the regulatory effects of national and local target setting and inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED), created a consensus of acceptance within a very short time. In its second report on the implementation of the NLS, OfSTED (2000) noted:

“(The National Literacy Strategy) has provided a common starting point and a ‘common language’ for everyone who is involved in the teaching of literacy”.

This did not, however, mean that the ‘common language’ had the same meaning for all teachers. Frater (2000) found considerable variation in the ways in which the requirements of the NLS had been understood within schools, with some teachers pre-occupied with “coverage”, to the detriment of coherent literacy learning.

The initial study
The study began within this changing literacy climate, with the intention of identifying what conceptions of subject knowledge in English were held by primary mentors of undergraduate student teachers on a three year ITT programme. A thematic analysis of written comments on lesson observation forms was undertaken, focusing only on the comments given under the heading ‘Subject Knowledge and Understanding’. This involved 700 lesson observation forms completed by mentors during the observation of English lessons, for the period 2000 – 2003. Lesson observation notes are an unreliable record taken alone, as these provide only a summary of mentoring conversations, and are produced for a particular audience (Hodder, 1994). Therefore findings from this data were triangulated through analysis of semi-structured interviews with 15 primary mentors and 15 tape recordings of post-lesson discussions between mentors and primary student teachers.

Ten themes were identified from the examination of lesson observation comments and the interviews. These themes could be related to elements of Shulman’s knowledge bases for teaching and indicated that mentors implicitly held more complex views of knowledge for teaching than that suggested in the ITT NC (DfEE 1998c)
Themes identified in written comments & interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Generic reference to subject knowledge &amp; understanding</th>
<th>Categories from Wilson, Shulman &amp; Richert (1987)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. “knowing what you are teaching”</td>
<td>This theme usually associated with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “knowing what you wanted the children to learn”</td>
<td>Subject matter (content) knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. being able to “get it across”</td>
<td>Curriculum knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. advice (this theme separately analysed)</td>
<td>Pedagogical (content) knowledge*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. reference to pupils difficulties/ misconceptions</td>
<td>Knowledge of learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. specific reference to NLS</td>
<td>Curriculum knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. reference to pupils’ needs as learners</td>
<td>Knowledge of learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. reference to use of teaching strategies</td>
<td>Pedagogical (content) knowledge*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. “confidence”</td>
<td>* it was not always possible to determine how far references to pedagogy were specific to literacy lessons.</td>
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Comparisons made of the incidence of each theme in written observations over the three year period and in relation to student teachers’ stage of training. Variations in relation to stages of training were one indicator of mentors’ conceptions of progression in student teachers’ professional learning, which emerged as a key finding from the initial study. Additionally, changes in the incidences of themes across all year groups indicated changes in mentors’ priorities in relation to their conception of subject knowledge. (Figs 1 and 2)

**Conceptions of subject-content knowledge.**

By the end of the three year period, the language and pedagogies of the NLS appeared to have been assimilated by mentors, and were transmitted to student teachers either apparently uncritically, or in a positive light, particularly if they had been trained as teachers since the introduction of the National Curriculum. Shifts in emphasis within the NLS, such as the encouragement to plan for more extended units of work, were directly reflected in mentors’ conversations with students. Primary mentors’ feedback on observed lessons – both written and verbal - focused very much on the specifics of the classroom and on effective delivery of the received NLS curriculum. There was no evidence of discussion about why certain aspects of the literacy curriculum were being taught, other than with reference to the NLS. Even where mentors had indicated in interviews that they held strong views about the purpose of English, or had reservations about aspects of the Framework, these views did not often emerge in discussions with student teachers. Thus the impression given, and presumably received, was that the NLS objectives represented an authoritative view of literacy learning and that the role of the teacher was to deliver them effectively.

These findings were in line with those of Edwards and Protheroe (2003) who found that mentoring conversations focused strongly on curriculum delivery, and also those of Twiselton (2000). Twiselton found that the introduction of the NLS had fostered a ‘curriculum delivery’ model of English teaching amongst the student teachers in her study, and reduced the number of students who might have been expected to adopt the broader ‘concept/skill builder’ approach she had found in student teachers prior to the introduction of the NLS. The evidence from the initial research indicated that at the time of the study,
primary mentors were similarly adopting a curriculum delivery model and fostering this in student teachers.

**Subject knowledge and pedagogy**
During the three-year period, direct references to the NLS reduced substantially, especially for final year students, and at the same time references to pedagogical strategies and to aspects of pupils’ learning increased (Figs 1 and 2). This suggested that, after the initial impact of the subject matter emphasis in the NLS had to some extent worn off or been assimilated by mentors, they re-focused on the elements of student teachers’ development they felt to be most important. This also seemed to be consistent with the findings of Poulson (2001) and Edwards and Ogden (1998) in relation to the functional and situated nature of primary teachers’ subject knowledge.

The use of questioning received the highest number of references, followed by explaining and modelling. These strategies can all be linked to the suggested teaching strategies in the NLS materials and to the emphasis on ‘interactive teaching’ promoted through both the NLS and NNS. Although it was the case that mentors had commented on the effective use of questions and explanations prior to the introduction of the NLS, what was interesting, was that these strategies were conceptualised as an aspects of ‘Subject Knowledge and Understanding’, rather than under the heading of ‘Teaching and Class Management’ elsewhere on the lesson observation form.

Following the initial study I was interested to see whether the shifts in emphasis outlined above would be continued, and how far they would be influenced by developments in the National Strategies.

**Knowledge bases for mentoring**
Jones and Straker (2006) asked primary and secondary mentors to identify how they acquired the knowledge that underpinned their work with trainee and newly qualified teachers. The majority of mentors in their study highlighted the importance of the prescribed standards for Qualified Teacher Status and the Induction year (www.tda.gov.uk teachers/standards) as an important area of ‘mentor knowledge’ which appeared to be accepted uncritically, in ways that seem reminiscent of the attitudes of primary mentors towards the NLS in the earlier research.

All of the 34 primary mentors in the Jones and Straker (2006) study believed their knowledge base for mentoring was gained through professional practice and experience and 74% through collaboration with colleagues. This emphasis on personal knowledge, or localised knowledge within the school context, raised questions about how far this had been “determined, and in some cases limited by factors inherent in the settings in which they acquired their knowledge” (Jones & Straker, 2006 p 176). As in my own earlier study, Jones & Straker also found that “critical reflection took place within the physical and conceptual confines of classroom teaching, or, at best, was confined to the immediate school context within which mentors were operating, but did not embrace wider educational issues” (Op cit p 179).

These findings were mirrored in comments made by mentors in the initial study:

"I think you know the NLS and the way I’ve worked with students has been very much structured by the NLS material, it’s not a watered down version but it does structure what I do with them."

Do you experience that as a tension?
Um not so much because it’s what we do in school. You know somebody coming to train then they need to be able to do what we do in school and that’s just taken for granted really...

(Interview with mentor Rosemary 2003)

The follow-up study would also consider these issues.

**Findings from the follow up study: thematic analysis**

Using the same thematic framework as in the initial research study, I analysed all available examples of mentor’s lesson observation comments on literacy lessons for a single cohort of undergraduate students: 2004-2007: 232 forms in total. Several noticeable changes emerged compared to the data collected between 2000 and 2003. While some of these changes might have been anticipated, on the basis of the patterns observed in the initial study, others were more unexpected, and in order to investigate possible reasons for these shifts in emphasis a series of group interviews were undertaken.

The trajectories previously noted for themes relating to pupils’ learning and pedagogical strategies (Themes 6, 8 and 9) were maintained. References to the use of pedagogical strategies continued to increase, and appeared in 50% of all comments by 2007. This was accompanied by a substantial increase in references to pupils’ misconceptions (Theme 6) from 7% in 2003 to over 20% in 2007, and a 20% increase in references to pupils’ needs as learners (Theme 8) in comments for Year 1 students.(Fig 1) Instances of advice offered to Year 1 students remained at a comparable level to the previous study, but the amount of advice offered to second and final year students increased between 15 and 20% in comparison to 2003.(Fig 2) As in the previous study, direct references to the PNS (as the NLS had become) continued to decrease and appeared in less than 4% of all comments in the follow-up study.

![Comparison of results for Year 1 students](image-url)

Fig. 1
The main questions for the interviews therefore centred on mentors’ opinions as to:
• why knowledge of the PNS literacy Framework was not referred to as evidence of subject knowledge
• why references to pupils’ misconceptions had increased
• whether expectations of Year 1 undergraduates had increased in terms of differentiation and awareness of individual needs, given the increase in the number of references to pupils’ needs as learners
• why mentors had increased the amount of written advice given to student teachers, particularly in the final year of training, in comparison with 2003, and whether this also indicated raised expectations

The interviews were conducted in four primary schools with a history of sustained involvement in mentoring. The schools were selected as being different in character and catchment, in order to try to capture a range of interpretations of the outcomes of the data analysis. ‘Woodside’ is a large primary school located in a dormitory village, with a mixed catchment; ‘Hillside’ is also a large school located in a more urban area of social deprivation, while ‘Beachside’ is a much smaller school, serving a similar catchment area to ‘Hillside’. The fourth school, ‘Waterside’ is located in an urban area of owner occupied housing, but draws its pupils from a wider catchment than the immediate locality. In total 17 mentors participated in the group interviews.

Findings from the group interviews: the literacy curriculum
In 2006/7 the literacy component of the Primary National Strategy (PNS), as the previous NLS and NNS had now become, was substantially revised, to reflect changing literacy priorities (Moss and Huxford 2007) and also the broader curriculum issues arising from Excellence and Enjoyment (2003) and the Every Child Matters (2003) agenda.

The mentors interviewed for this study were mainly primary teachers with several years mentoring experience. Some were able to make comparisons between their mentoring approaches during the early years of the NLS compared with their more recent practice:
“Maybe we were just so obsessed with the structure of it (i.e. the previous NLS Framework), maybe we didn’t notice what was going on in the lesson. Maybe
because its more relaxed now and we’re allowed to be freer we can concentrate more on what the pupils are saying and what the student is saying and you can pick it up” (Beachside Primary- discussion about increase in comments on pupils’ misconceptions)

“It was very uppermost in our minds. We were given this document and teachers were supposed to know this, this and this. It was a lot of subject knowledge that people were struggling with…” (Waterside Primary)

In all four schools, mentors attributed the decrease in direct references to the PNS to developments in the Framework. Comments on feeling “relaxed”, being “allowed to be freer” and not being in a “straitjacket” emerged at various points during the interviews. However, mentors’ views as to why the references were no longer appearing in written comments varied depending on the approach taken by the individual schools as they responded to the revised Framework in varying ways.

“Woodside Primary” welcomed the flexibility they felt the PNS now provided and had encouraged the integration of literacy teaching across the curriculum. They had “slotted in literacy and numeracy where it worked for us. We didn’t work round them”. Comments from the other schools focused more on student teachers’ understanding of how to support literacy learning, within the current guidelines offered by the Framework. Mentors at Hillside felt the emphasis for student teachers had shifted from being able to “follow” the previous guidelines towards “more a case of ‘Can you deliver the lessons linked to ideas supported in the Framework’”. Elsewhere, the decline in references to official curricula was attributed to the level of detail provided in the downloadable unit plans. This had, however, shifted mentors’ attention further towards pedagogical matters:

“All they have to do is use it, they don’t have to know how to make it up (Beachside Primary) ” (i.e. develop their own plans as with early versions of the previous Framework)

“…….(What’s important is) do they know how to move the students (i.e. pupils) a step on? Are they aware of what they need to do?” (Watertown Primary).

Advice to students
The influence of the PNS, and the revised Framework in particular, was also evident in the nature of the advice being increasingly offered to student teachers in all phases of training. As in the previous study, much of the direct advice offered to first year students related to subject matter knowledge and was often written in the imperative mode:

Remember to tell them what you are looking for (i.e. full stops, capital letters) (Written comment Year 1 student teacher, Reception class 2005)

Please use the correct vocabulary ‘phoneme’ and ‘digraph’ – use actions and pictures to support the brainstorm to cater for visual and kinaesthetic learners. (Written comment Year 1 student teacher, Year 1 class 2005).

With students at later stages of training, although references to subject matter knowledge continued, there were also more references to improving pedagogical approaches or moving pupils’ learning forward, often couched in less didactic language:

You obviously understand what connectives are and how balanced arguments work, but think about how you develop the children’s ideas through your questioning. You
must bring their learning on – maybe you could have asked the children to state the
connectives used by other children. (Written comment Year 2 student teacher, Year 5
class 2006).

The lesson was delivered using a variety of good teaching strategies – reading
poems, modelling questions and answers, focused teaching and individual feedback.
Modelling some writing in the middle of the lesson would have helped some children
progress further. (Written comment Year 2 student teacher, Year 4 class 2006).

The amount and range of these types of comment had increased for both second and final
year student teachers, compared to the initial study (from 20% to 40% of comments). As in
the initial study, some advice was focused on encouraging student teachers to reflect more
closely on the specifics of pupil learning, including pupils’ misconceptions:

There were some misconceptions about the lesson that you needed to address –
complex sentences and technical vocabulary. Some modelling on the board might
have helped them to remember. You need to be very clear on what you are teaching
in order to put it across to the children otherwise they will just reinforce each other’s
misconceptions. (Written comment Year 3 student teacher, Year 5 class 2007).

In the initial study much of the advice offered to final year students used conditional
language: “It might have been better to…” “You could have…. However, there were more
instances of imperative forms in more recent comments: “You need to…” “Try to…. This
may be partly explained by the fact that these students undertook their final placement in the
first year after the introduction of the revised literacy Framework. A number of comments
categorised under the ‘advice’ theme referred to specific pedagogical strategies whose use
was being particularly promoted through the unit plans and the training programmes linked
to the PNS.

The session was fine, however it would have benefited from an S&L session with
whiteboards, teacher modelling & use of IWB to reinforce/drive learning to promote
good writing. (Written comment Year 3 student teacher, Year 3 class 2007).

Modelling writing - try actually verbalising thoughts while writing and take longer
showing what is expected. Connective examples worked well, and I think they would
have been more helpful if they were left on display. (Written comment Year 3 student
teacher, Year 4 class 2007).

Mentors in the group interviews also linked these examples to the revised Framework, and to
the influence of in-school training,

“Modelling is still a point on the unit plan. It’s a heading there” (Waterside Primary)

“These things are more at the forefront – every time we have training it’s about
learning style…. Any course we seem to be on does seem to focus on the learning
strategies of children and then it’s how we’ve been shown something and we’re
passing it on” (Waterside Primary)

and they were also aware of the impact of performance management and peer observation on
their practice as mentors
“Modelling- that’s the change in the new Framework, that the ways it’s structured we’ve had workshops on it so we ourselves as staff are clear about what is the difference between modelled and shared and guided and I think now because we’re more confident we can show the students”

“At this school particularly we are train, train, train and obviously then we train each other and we peer... and we work together extremely well and I know that when I have a student I have very high expectations” (Hillside Primary)

The strong influence of in school training and collaboration with colleagues which emerges from these mentors’ comments relates closely to the findings of Jones and Straker (2006), where 74% of primary mentors cited collaboration with colleagues as a source of their knowledge base for mentoring.

Changing expectations of student teachers.
Mentors were undecided as to whether expectations for student teachers in the early stages of training had increased, or whether they had shifted in focus. They were unanimous in suggesting that there had been significant changes in the ways they thought about teaching and learning, and that this had affected their mentoring practice so that their assumptions and expectations of what student teachers could be expected to know and understand had also altered.

“Doesn’t that come down to inclusion? We’re expected to manage a wider range. I think we’re expected to make it more high profile now” (Beachside Primary)

“Because teachers are expected to work like that then you push it on (to the student teachers) if you’re modelling for them” (Hillside Primary)

“We’re talking and working with the way children learn and their needs as learners so I think it’s probably much higher in our minds”. “Probably because it’s much more normal for us. It’s what we’re thinking about all the time. We kind of assume that would be the first thing they’d learned.” “It’s a change in expectations so that rather than expecting them maybe to have behaviour control we’re now expecting them to have more thoughts about learning. We’re more proactive in school in terms of thinking that way” (Woodside Primary).

None of the mentors interviewed regarded the increase in advice offered to final year students as an indication that these students were not meeting their expectations. In some cases they felt they had raised their expectations, in line with those of the PNS, but that student teachers were generally well able to meet these. They attributed the increase in the amount of advice to their own desire to support the students, and to their ownership of their professional practice, both as teachers and as mentors. Again, these findings resonate with those of Jones and Straker (2006), where all the primary mentors in their study felt that they drew on their own professional practice to inform their mentoring knowledge.

“I see myself more as a supporter rather than an evaluator. I don’t see my role as to criticise, but to be there to help them grow themselves” (Waterside Primary)

“It’s teachers modelling – it’s us saying that’s what I mean and this is how you could do it.
Do you think teachers have become more confident in more recent years? Yeah, yeah I suppose we are...” (Beachside Primary)
The continued increase in the number of references to pedagogical strategies evidently reflected the priorities of these mentors, who saw themselves as being able to offer advice based on their own experience to student teachers:

“….now it’s so much an integral part of what we do, it’s probably improved our own skills. We know what kind of feedback has been useful to us in the past, we know what has been useful to students… We’ve done a lot of work on higher order questioning and it’s something… as we focus on it we get better at it ourselves so when you hear a student then you think ‘Oh, if you tried it this way’… (Woodside Primary)

Conclusions

This follow up study has largely substantiated the findings of the research undertaken in 2000-2003, and also that of Jones and Straker (2006). Whilst welcoming the opportunities they felt the revised Framework presented to adopt a more flexible approach to literacy teaching, the mentors interviewed appeared to accept externally generated requirements as a given. The findings of the earlier study suggested that mentors were both operating a “curriculum delivery” (Twiselton 2000) model themselves, and encouraging this in student teachers. This later study suggests that mentors are continuing to increase their focus on student teachers’ understanding of children’s learning as a key aspect of subject knowledge and reducing their attention to the requirements of the formalised curriculum. However, it is less easy to say whether this signifies a shift away from the practice of “curriculum delivery”, or whether the implementation of the pre-prepared unit plans is now a taken-for-granted activity in some schools. Anecdotal evidence suggests the latter may be the case, and if so, this strengthens the argument, made by Jones and Straker (2006) concerning the implications of mentors’ localised knowledge on student teachers’ broader professional development.

References to pedagogy reflect changes in emphasis in the PNS, evidenced by the comments about in-school training made by the mentors in interviews. The pedagogical vocabulary used by mentors appears more extensive than in the earlier study and is used with more apparent confidence in many of the written comments.

“Yes we have a vocabulary and maybe because we monitor each other as well, we use that vocabulary and we instinctively use that vocabulary with students”

“We understand it, we know what we mean.” (Woodside Primary)

This represents a further development in terms of what Ofsted (2000) referred to as the “common language” of the NLS. Mentors acknowledge that much of the vocabulary is drawn from official sources:

“As a whole school we’re more aware of what an outstanding lesson looks like, a good, a satisfactory and we’re applying what we know to the students….that provides quite a lot of vocabulary as well, knowing the criteria” (Woodside Primary)

However, while there were clear examples of the effects of the “standards agenda” and a culture of performativity, these were moderated by a strong commitment to children’s learning and to supporting the learning of student teachers.

“It’s not just misconceptions, it’s children’s learning”

“Our whole focus now, whether we’re doing performance management or curriculum manager observation, our focus is on the children’s learning. It’s the first thing we’re looking for, not the teaching”. (Woodside Primary)
In some cases this also meant that mentors felt their expectations of student teachers had increased:

“We take such accountability for our children, and we have to prove to our Head…”
“...I would say we expect more from them (the students) and I’m saying this is what you need to do to make it a lesson worth delivering, and being very specific” (Hillside Primary).

It could be argued that these, and other comments, reflect core professional beliefs on the part of primary teachers. Furlong and Maynard (1995) refer to the “filter” used by primary teachers with respect to subject knowledge: “their understanding of children and how best they learn”, and Osborn et al (2000) to the process of “creative mediation” whereby teachers accommodate to changes in their professional lives which appear to accord with their own values and beliefs, while resisting others. The mentors in this study appear to have accommodated to the “re-professionalisation” of teachers initiated in Teachers: meeting the challenge of change (DfEE 1998c) in ways which reflect their core professional beliefs concerning children’s (and student teacher’s) learning.

The influence of the PNS in the broader sense, as well as the successive literacy frameworks, has made a significant impact on primary mentors’ conceptions of subject knowledge, and provided a pedagogical vocabulary which influences the ways in which teachers share their professional knowledge with student teachers. Mentors themselves see this as an advantage compared to their previous experience: “I remember when I first trained they were very general comments you used to put” (Mentor Woodside Primary), and there is surely no question that possession of an appropriate vocabulary enables complex concepts to be communicated effectively. However, questions remain about the transmission of a pedagogical vocabulary which owes as much to centralised policy concerns about educational standards as it does to the commitment to children’s learning expressed by the mentors in this study.

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