

# Close to practice research as a means of rethinking elements of student–teacher's classroom practice

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## Abstract

This article explores a form of classroom inquiry linked to postgraduate primary student–teachers' education, whilst on practicum in England. The inquiry model is congruent with Stenhouse's notions of 'teachers as researchers' undertaking 'systematic' inquiry in a 'naturalistic' environment. Feldman further develops Stenhouse's conception into a definition of action research, where teachers come to a better understanding of their practice. The inquiry bases itself on the central tenants of close to practice (CtP), which is defined as research that: focuses on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice and involves collaboration between people whose main expertise is research, practice, or both. As teacher educators, we evaluated the potential of CtP inquiry, by undertaking a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of sixteen student–teacher research reports. CDA revealed that several socio-cognitive processes took place as a result of, student–teachers engaging in CtP research, including explorations of identity, beliefs and values and negotiation of power relationships and structures. Further analysis provided insights into Stenhouses' conceptualisation, firstly, how student–teachers committed to developing their understanding of the curriculum with respect to teaching design. Secondly, the findings resonate with student–teachers rejecting acting as 'docile agents' within existing structures and developing 'pathways to emancipation and autonomy'. Thirdly, testimony revealed that student–teachers valued this mode of

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learning and developed critical attitudes to educational research. This study has clear implications for the design of initial teacher education programs and the continued professional development of teachers in England and potentially further afield.

#### KEYWORDS

close-to-practice research, initial teacher education, student–teacher inquiry and socio-cognitive discourse analysis

## INTRODUCTION

The advantages of student–teachers developing their inquiry skills are wide-ranging and include being able to use research as a lens through which to view practice (Burn, 2007; Hiebert et al., 2007; Rowley & Slack, 2004), reflective gains pertaining to responsiveness to learners needs (Medwell & Wray, 2014; Parkinson, 2009) and construction and evaluation of new pedagogy (Peel, 2020; Van Katwijk et al., 2022). Such is the efficacy of developing an ‘inquiry-based stance’ (Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2010, p. 14) that it has been proposed student–teachers may be empowered to even act as agents of curriculum change (Fullan, 1993; Priestley & Drew, 2016). This aspiration resonates with the realisation of Stenhouse’s seminal work on moving teachers from a position of passive acceptance of knowledge to active inquiry into a classroom-based phenomenon (Stenhouse, 1975).

Our understanding of curriculum design aligns with that of Elliot and Norris (2011, p. 6) and their interpretations of Stenhouse’s definition of curriculum, being not merely a list of content but rather a flexible entity that is ‘actualised in the classroom through the interaction of teacher and students.’ We argue that curriculum design is the creation of a process by teachers (and preferably with learners) that enables learners to fulfil their educational potential in the broadest sense.

Encouraging student–teachers to question and refine classroom practice starts during initial teacher education (ITE) and follows throughout their professional lives (Tang, 2003). This is a complex process that involves student–teachers developing knowledge of curricula, contextual factors, and current governmental policies and agendas. Throughout this article, we use the term ITE to denote the comprehensive and holistic nature of educating student–teachers in the broadest sense, rather than the term *initial teacher training* (ITT), which describes the training requirements as delineated by government policy. Evidence suggests that engagement with classroom-based research inquiry occurs not just transiently during ITE but rather teachers may see their engagement in ‘rich research opportunities’ (Stenhouse, 1981) as an opportunity for significant ongoing professional development through their career (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

In this article, we examine the affordances of a scaffolded inquiry (by which we mean student–teachers supported by specialist teacher educators who are active researchers, on a one-to-one basis), consisting of a modified form of CtP classroom-based research.

The inquiry is based on the central philosophy of a CtP approach, which is defined by BERA as research that:

focuses on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice and involves collaboration between people whose main expertise is research, practice, or both.

(BERA, 2018a, p. 1)

Student–teachers are emergent researchers, and often, small classroom-based projects (which are a requirement of their ITE programme) are their first experiences of inquiry. For this reason and to maintain the validity of the approach, we advocate the use of a restricted number of modified data collection tools, as detailed in Blackmore and Hatley (2021). These tools and the proposed research design and underpinning theory support student–teachers to undertake credible classroom-based inquiry whilst making scaffolded choices to maintain their sense of developing researcher identity (Blackmore & Hatley, 2021).

CtP research, defined by Wyse et al. (2021) and supported by BERA as a means to improve the quality of empirical research for the Research Excellence Framework 2021 (BERA, 2018a) for education, provides a means where small-scale classroom research can be undertaken by a range of practitioners in an accessible and robust manner. It advocates research as a collaborative process where the needs and aspirations of research communities (schools) are prefaced and supports the enforcement of actors within those social contexts: children, teachers, support staff and senior management. Wyse et al. (2021) emphasise the need for inquiry to encompass a systematic approach and include robust research design, theory and methods to enable credible and authentic findings.

## NATIONAL POLICY FOR ITE AND EARLY CAREER TEACHERS

The purpose of small-scale research, as outlined in the previous section, combined with the benefits our student–teachers derived from their sustained inquiry, provides a rationale for filling gaps in the current DfE policy for England within the Core Content Framework for ITE (CCF) and the Early Career Framework (ECF) for early career teachers (UCET, 2019). Both frameworks provide statutory guidance about what student–teachers are required to evidence during ITE to achieve qualified teacher status and subsequently during their induction period in school, which may last one or two years. These policies contain three areas which, within the business of school life, are challenging to prioritize in school practice and may constitute gaps in teacher's skillset: critical engagement with research evidence to enhance practice; effective, transformative pedagogy and using reliable, robust sources. This article asserts that undertaking CtP research enables the filling of these gaps. For example, during ITE (DfE, 2019), teachers are required to practice, receive feedback on and improve at 'Engaging critically with research and using evidence to critique practice.' (p. 29). Further, Early Career teachers undertaking induction are required to engage critically with research and discuss evidence with colleagues (DfE, 2021, p. 24). Whilst the CCF does not include specific provisions for student–teachers to undertake their own CtP research, such as that outlined in this article, it does provide room for institutions to adopt this approach should they wish, stating that individual institutions are free to integrate 'additional analysis and critique of theory, research and expert practice as they deem appropriate' (DfE, 2021, p. 4). To fulfil what both statutory frameworks are asking, student–teachers need the skills before they qualify. The focus of this article is to explore the benefits to student–teachers of undertaking CtP research, particularly with respect to gaining a deeper understanding of the role of research evidence and its critical use in practice. Hence, it would seem an ideal way to provide both student and early career teachers with what they need to effectively fulfil the statutory requirements and thus enhance their quality as teachers. As stated by Husbands and Pearce (2012, p. 2), 'High performance in education systems depends on the quality of teaching' and quoting Barber and Mourshed (2007) 'the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers' (Husbands & Pearce, 2012, p. 2).

Husbands and Pearce (2012, p. 5) further highlight that effective pedagogy depends on teacher's 'beliefs (why teachers act as they do)' and that for teaching to be

transformative, teachers need the participation of learners. They further state that dialogue from pupil to teacher about how they learn is essential to effective pedagogy (Husbands & Pearce, 2012, p. 11). Undertaking CtP-sustained research inquiries, such as those analysed in this article would on the surface provide opportunity to facilitate student–teacher's engagement with pupils and provide a vehicle for the students to reflect on their own practices and beliefs. This also potentially fills the gaps mentioned above in the statutory guidance.

In addition, both the CCF and the ECF contain lists of resources. Whilst they contain a lot related to specific aspects of curriculum knowledge, there is nothing about how to carry out research. It is assumed that teachers know how to do it. This raises the question of how they will know how to do it if they have never had the chance to do it themselves, with expert guidance along the way. It is assumed that student and early career teachers will know how to appraise sources and critically select those that are robust and rigorous. Student–teachers and early career teachers are left to their own devices, unsupported and unprepared. Our programme builds on these skills. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) do support research in schools and provides a series of 'How To' guides (NFER, 2013). However, this is not mandatory or advised by the government to help develop this skill set. Furthermore, these guides assume teachers are going to do research, but they are not about teachers using research or taking a critical approach. There is a significant difference between adopting what can be seen arguably as a tick list compared to a sustained academic inquiry with all the personal reflection and professional development that comes with an academic research project. Our approach provides this skillset so that these requirements in the CCF and ECF can be fulfilled.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Student–teacher participants**

The CtP research was undertaken as part of the existing Masters level requirements of the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course. The sixteen student–teachers who volunteered to share their research reports (of approximately 4000 words) were members of several cohorts over a period of three years.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the College of Arts, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Panel (CAHE REP) at the University of Worcester, approval number CAHE20210004. On completion of their ITE program, the student–teachers (who were students of the researchers) were invited to consider sharing their research reports with a wider audience as part of their continuing professional development. The research was disseminated by an online student journal, which was available to current and past student–teachers in the ITE programs. Submission was purely voluntary, and the student–teachers were able to edit their research reports should they wish before submitting them for online publication. Since this was at the end of the course and the student–teachers had fulfilled all requirements of the ITE program, this lowered any perceived power relationship between the researchers and student–teachers as the researchers were no longer assessing student attainment on the course. The opportunity to edit the reports ensured the student–teachers were totally comfortable with their content and further supported the ethicality of the project. The CAHE granted approval to undertake

critical discourse analysis (CDA) on the student–teacher research reports for the purpose of revealing pedagogical insights for future cohorts of student–teachers. In this research article, indicative quotes from the student–teachers have been attributed to pseudonyms as a means to decrease the possibility of identification.

To foster the highest standards of ethicality and an appreciation of the importance of collaboration within the research context, our CtP teaching model involved student–teachers co-constructing the research questions and aims with teachers and children. They chose an area of curriculum that they had a particular interest in and had received specialised training for. They spoke to children about areas of the curriculum that were interesting and pertinent to their study and liaised with teachers to determine the resources available and ensure a purposeful outcome of their inquiries. For example, one school was interested in the Teachers as Readers (TaR) initiative (Cremin et al., 2009) and another had just modified their Forest School area and was exploring new pedagogical approaches.

### Scaffolding the close to practice student–teacher research

A guidance document was prepared detailing the interpretivist approach alongside a detailed description of the methodology and specific data collection tools available. This increased methodological scaffolding took the form of short exemplar case studies detailing how small classroom-based inquiry could be undertaken. Student–teachers, in consultation with the school and their specialist tutor, were encouraged to make their own choices around research design and craft an appropriate research question.

The student–teachers chose methods that were suitable for their school whilst accommodating the needs and strengths of their pupils, using the following four data collection tools:

- Semi-structured observations.
- Purposeful interactions (akin to Spicksley, 2018—walking interviews).
- Children's work scrutiny.
- Document analysis.

These tools were all aligned with an interpretivist stance and the student–teachers were committed to envoice children and teachers and hence act in their best interests, as advocated by BERA guidelines (2018b, no. 23, p. 14). Two data collection tools were chosen for each CtP inquiry, to increase the likelihood of some degree of data triangulation enabling student–teachers to exercise their criticality skills and make tentative judgements on the credibility of the data.

Full details of the student–teacher inquiry approach are detailed in Blackmore and Hatley (2021). In short:

#### Semi-structured observations

These were designed by the student–teachers to focus on three to four key elements they felt were important with respect to learning in the classroom. The sample size was on average four children to enable them, with their limited experience, to complete observations at different times and places. Student–teachers, often in liaison with class teachers and curriculum leads, prevalently opted to create a simple, one page, observation schedule with some key elements they would look for.

## Purposeful interactions

This data collection tool was similar to 'walking interviews' (Spicksley, 2018) and 'tours' (Clark & Moss, 2011), where children either invited the student–teacher on a tour of their setting or talked to them while inhabiting a chosen place in school, for example, the reading corner, Forest School outdoor play area. The aim of the approach was to lessen the power differential often associated with interviewer: interviewee interaction during data collection. The central ethos of the approach was to envoice the child and allow them to take the lead in articulating their learning. For example, a child might tell the student–teacher why a particular place was important or significant for them.

## Children's work scrutiny

This was undertaken following negotiation with the school and class teacher to ensure the data collection did not result in excessive expectations of the children. Children were encouraged to communicate their ideas in any way that enabled them, for example, some children produced drawings, pictures, models, mind maps or music compositions to depict their learning. Student–teachers were advised to explore key texts pertaining to Arts Based Educational Research (Clough & Nutbrown, 2019) which were a useful starting point for those wishing to follow this type of inquiry approach. The significant advantage of this data collection tool was that it could provide insight into children's unspoken worlds, or in the words of Spenceley (2012), the aspects they perceived but could not always fully articulate since they '*frequently draw to express that which they do not possess the language to express*'. (Spenceley, 2012, p. 191). Work scrutiny also included examples of written work from older children.

## Document analysis

This tool was based on the processes associated with a systematised literature review involving a broad and systematic critical examination of existing research on a chosen topic. As a starting point, supervisors chose one book which gave an overview of their specialist subject area. Student–teachers read the text and applied critical decision-making to focus on two or three particular aspects of pedagogy or knowledge that interested them for more detailed inquiry. They then expanded their search to other pertinent research from a range of genres include research articles, reports and other research-based works. Student–teachers demonstrated criticality by documenting what literature they included to represent 'evidence' of best practice and what studies they found less compelling and justified their choices. This data collection tool was chosen to align with the central precepts of how research studies can be systematically identified to constitute secondary data. Student–teachers were encouraged to critique this method and consider the inherent limitations of their approach.

To facilitate student–teacher analysis of the data from two of the four data collection tools supervisors gave extensive guidance for the data analysis stage as described in the following section. Supervisors also modelled how two data sets could be used as a basic means of triangulation, according to Denscombe (2017).

## Scaffolding for qualitative data analysis

Student–teachers were encouraged to view the analysis as primarily being driven by the data from their chosen collection tools. As a method that would be useful for each of the

tools, the basic principles of open coding were modelled for them (as described by Braun & Clarke, 2006) using existing data sets of both texts and images. Several student–teachers deployed the approach of memo-making, similar to how they might annotate children's work in school as a means of initial sense-making and coding. They then endeavoured to identify emergent themes from the data. During the process they explored potential triangulation of data by comparison between their two chosen data collection tools. For example, this could be achieved reviewing observational data of children working in pairs alongside a purposeful interaction with children discussing their pair-work.

The following section details how the effectiveness of our model for CtP student research was evaluated with respect to supporting aspects of student–teacher engagement with refining and developing classroom practice.

## Conceptual model of the study

The study consisted of two phases, an initial phase where student–teacher research report texts were subject to CDA to determine common structures of discourse. The second phase followed, where these structures were viewed through the additional lens of the three key elements of Stenhouse's work on teacher classroom-based inquiry. In this way, the mental models of the student–teachers were explored to reveal their sense of identity, feelings and, beliefs and perceptions of power structures/interactions. Prevalent discourse structures were examined to determine any resonance with notions of teacher commitment to curriculum development, developing a sense of autonomy and critical dispositions as advocated by Stenhouse (Figure 1).

## Evaluation of the model using CDA

Acknowledging again the assertion of Cremin et al. (2009) that effective pedagogy depends on teacher's beliefs and that when their work is influenced by dialogue with learners, as it is in the case of these student–teachers, those beliefs and resultant pedagogy are potentially transformative, it was important to select a tool of analysis which enabled exploration of the student's inner worlds. To ensure a focus on that inner world, we chose to focus deliberately on sections of the reports that outlined student's descriptions of the impact of their research on pedagogical development. To do so, we employed the sociocognitive approach to CDA (Van Dijk, 2014, 2016).

Fairclough (2003) describes CDA as a way of revealing both the conscious and unconscious minds of authors because their beliefs and intentions are shown through the choices they make when structuring texts. Part of this analysis is to look at what events, beliefs or ideas are brought to the fore and which may be less so and in considering this complex interplay within the text the author's ideologies can be made known. Within the sociocognitive approach, this is described by Van Dijk (2016, p. 66) as their 'mental model'. Askewa and Bone (2019) also affirm that beliefs form a part of the mental model, adding weight to our choice of the sociocognitive approach as a way of exploring student–teacher's inner worlds.

In addition to the student–teacher's mental model revealed from the relationship between the textual choices and the author, it is also acknowledged that the texts themselves are socially situated (Guerrero & Torres-Olave, 2022). Not only is the student–teacher's mental model influential, but the text itself exists within a complex web of actors who may also influence the student–teacher's understanding, subsequently aiding them in the development of their identities through self-reflection. These may include other teachers or mentors in school and perhaps even academic supervisors as their projects develop. Seen in this light,

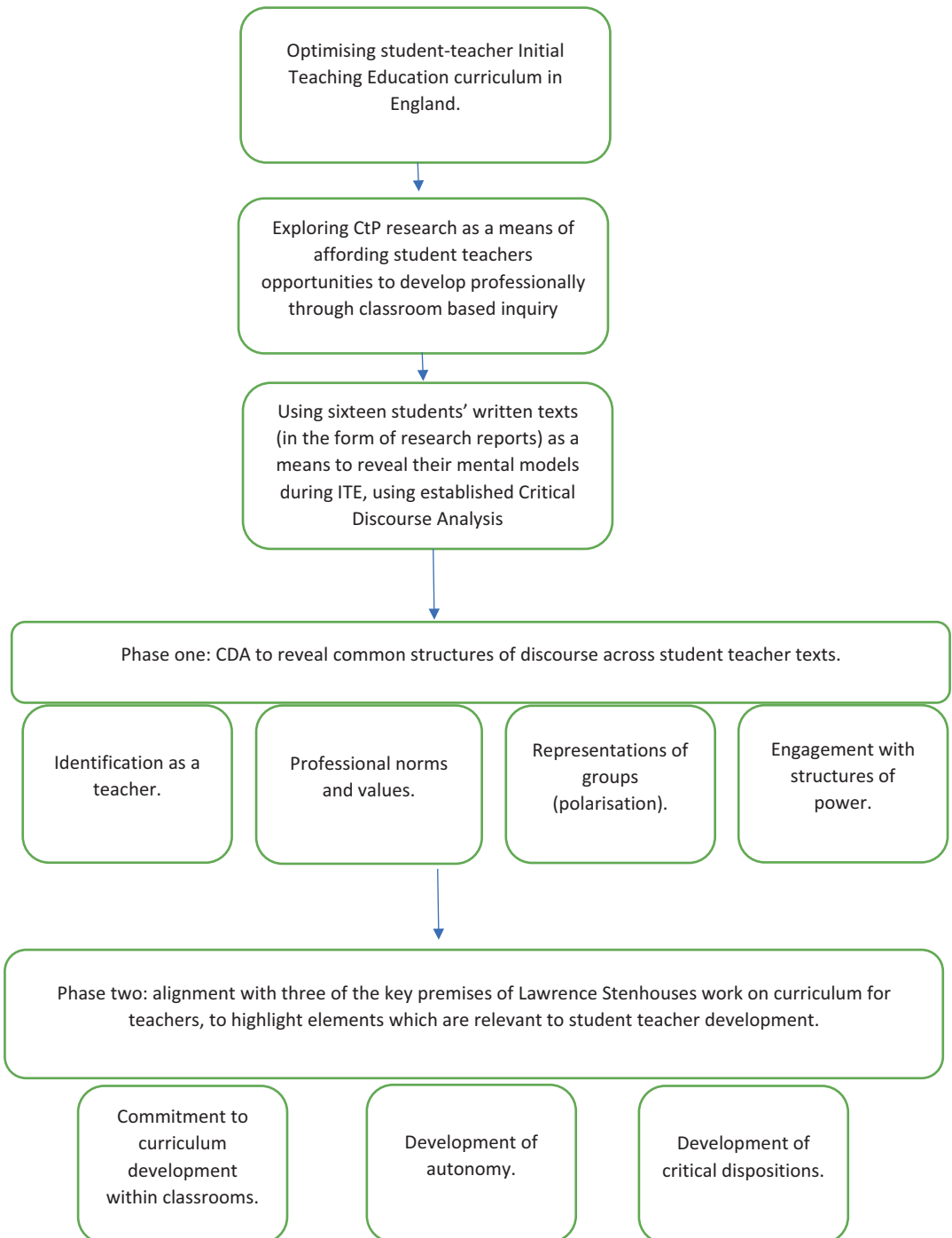


FIGURE 1 Conceptualisation of the study.

the sociocognitive approach to CDA enables an analysis of who student–teachers may become in addition to their mental model that exists at the time of text construction.

The socially situated nature of texts, the cognition forming the student–teacher's mental model and the actual discourse itself form what Van Dijk (2016) has called the



'Discourse-Cognition-Society triangle'. This represents a complex interplay between, for example, the student and the school, the school and government policy, the student and policy and the student and the university. These relationships are also changeable, and the student–teacher has to make sense of these relationships and the realities they find themselves in quickly, often without any prior knowledge or experience of these complex dynamics. These dynamics are infused with norms, values, behaviours and differing beliefs of the 'right way' to teach or behave in a professional setting in addition to the more informal ways of relating associated with a group of human beings in a workplace. This interplay is conceptualised by Van Dijk (2016, p. 70) into the 'macro level of the overall structure and relations of groups and organisations' (in this case, the school, the government, the university and so on) and the 'micro level of everyday interaction of social members'. These are often not explicitly articulated but must be absorbed through experience, which the student–teacher does not yet have. The student–teacher will also interpret these through the lens of their own ideals and aspirations as they begin their teaching in school. The student–teacher's research reports and the approach to CDA used to analyse them thus reveal some of this complexity and provide a window into the active part student–teacher's play in a journey towards empowerment, effective pedagogy and subsequent transformation, as outlined by Stenhouse (1981) and Husbands and Pearce (2012). In short, it demonstrates the effectiveness of our CtP model for supporting aspects of a student–teacher's professional development.

When analysing the discourse, it is important to pay attention to the genre of the text. We would expect a student–teacher's academic work to be organised in a particular way with titles, headings, literature review, methodology, analysis, discussion and conclusion, for example. This forms the text's 'superstructure' (Van Dijk, 2016, p. 72) and was not included in the analysis because they are not reflective of a student's personal choice. Instead, the analysis focused on several specific 'structures of discourse' (Van Dijk, 2016). These are more subjective and therefore reflective of the student–teacher's mental model.

In terms of the practicalities of analysing the student–teachers' research reports, this was achieved by reading through line by line each of the sixteen research reports written by student–teachers, who volunteered for their research reports to be published in an online journal platform. Areas of text that pertained to the student–teachers' articulation of their ideas about their classroom-based research or practice were identified and collated in an analysis matrix on a student–teacher basis. In this way structures of discourse could be compared across all sixteen participants as well as the four structures of discourse being compared for each participant's research report. We feel this added to the rigour of the analysis. Re-reading of the sections of text was then undertaken to familiarise the researchers with the textual content, and on a word-by-word basis, structures of discourse (e.g., 'I'—denoting a sense of identity) were then highlighted. To identify themes, analyses from each report were pooled to identify key emergent themes across student–teachers. Themes were then reviewed with respect to the original text to check there were no misinterpretations or inconsistencies.

The structures of discourse include:

- Identification (Van Dijk, 2016, p. 73)—showing whether the student identified as a teacher, a student–teacher or an outsider, enabling us to infer their professional self-concept (seen through the use of 'I', 'we' or 'them').
- Norms and values—whether they spoke in terms of professional or societal 'norms (of good conduct) and values (of what should be striven for)' (Van Dijk, 2016, p. 74).
- Polarization—whether a certain group is represented positively and others negatively (Van Dijk, 2016, p. 73).
- Power—the complex interplay that must be interpreted by student–teachers quickly will

engage them with structures of power. Therefore, how power was represented in their discourse was also of interest since it may have signified their attempts at negotiating complex established power relationships. They may have internalised existing relationships, becoming 'habituated to the status quo' (Lim & Cheatham, 2020, p. 5) or endeavoured to change them.

## Findings

The findings will be articulated through the lens of Lawrence Stenhouses' perspectives on teacher inquiry according to the three following themes derived from his seminal works.

- Commitment to ongoing curriculum design and development as a result of active inquiry.
- Emancipation and development of autonomy of teachers as a result of enactment.
- Development of critical dispositions as an elevation of professional learning.

The first theme links substantially with structures of discourse as detailed in the analytical strategy in that it addresses student–teachers identification in terms of identifying themselves as classroom-based researchers rather than passive recipients of instruction. These articulations were often identified in the text as sentences using the word 'I' linked to 'teaching' or 'teacher'.

The second theme furthers this change in mental model and illustrates the will and commitment of student–teachers to explore and develop a deeper understanding of their inner journey as a professional, involving their identity and potential emancipation. These responses were often identified as verbs describing how a student–teacher had felt they acted or responded to children during their practice.

The final theme resonates with degrees of student–teachers' assimilation of negotiating existing social structures and power relationships or challenges to professional and social norms and values associated with aspects of professional learning. These perspectives were more difficult to identify but often consisted of references to school or governmental policy.

To illustrate the richness of the data set, we have provided [Table 1](#) to highlight the three themes and present indicative quotes from the student research texts. Structures of discourse are denoted in bold to demonstrate the features revealed by the CDA.

The following section looks in more depth at specific quotes from student–teachers illustrating the three themes.

### **Commitment to ongoing curriculum research and development**

All the research reports examined with CDA revealed that student–teachers found engagement with CtP projects a purposeful means of developing practice. They detailed how, after undertaking the research, they felt more able to assess and formulate their classroom practice, as illustrated by the following:

The study has developed my professional practice as a trainee TEACHER;  
strengthening my understanding of a pedagogical approach to teaching.

Eva, Early Years specialist

'My' and 'own' denote the teacher identifying as a trainee teacher but with ownership of her developing practice. It is interesting to note that the word 'Teacher' was capitalised in the text

TABLE 1 Overview of the findings.

Themes identified	Indicative quotes
<p>Student-teachers demonstrating a commitment to ongoing curriculum design and development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaking to the school's history coordinator ... confirmed to me that history is regarded as a subject well-suited to learning outside of the classroom, and that the use of any resources, collections or sites available is a fantastic way of giving the children a practical and hands-on experience</li> <li>• This project has reinforced my assertion that reading to children is vital in promoting their motivation to read for pleasure. It brings many other benefits ... having a pleasurable experience as a group ... building positive relationships between teacher and children ... It will form the backbone of my approach to literacy as a teacher and I will read to my class on a daily basis</li> <li>• My Findings [of the research inquiry] will impact my future teaching, as I now have a greater understanding of how story is an invaluable tool for developing certain aspects of children's chronological understanding; namely the ability to sequence and discuss complex time-related concepts. Children's lack of understanding of duration in KS1 will make me consciously reinforce basic units of time and how long they are in real terms</li> </ul>
<p>Student-teachers indicating their emancipation and development of autonomy as a result of enactment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a trainee primary educator, I am developing my own style of teaching and reflecting on the effect that I have, directly and indirectly, on the children's confidence and progression</li> <li>• The research will shape my professional understanding and future practice, I will continue to use storytelling as a means of supporting the oral language proficiency for both children with EAL and EFL. I also have the added benefit of deepening my understanding of the basic pattern of second language acquisition, which will support me throughout my career in terms of planning and providing effective support to EAL learners</li> <li>• This research has revealed that my creative background is a strength within my teaching practice. I have the opportunity to model and support children to develop their creative thinking skills. I could potentially impact curriculum design and a whole school ethos in my future practice</li> </ul>
<p>Student-teachers developing critical dispositions as an elevation of professional learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This study has extremely formative for me as a teacher. It has forced me to consider the emotional basis of learning, and the interaction between social relationships and effective teaching and learning. Perhaps effective learning cannot take place without meaningful and positive communication at the heart of the classroom?</li> <li>• With so much research uncovering the impact of typefaces on reading ability, comprehension and experience in accordance with my own findings, fonts need careful consideration and adjustments from teachers in relation to the child and purpose of reading, having clearly proven (in agreement with Chen &amp; Lin, 2014; Gump, 2001; Walker, 2015) that, with fonts, one size does not fit all</li> <li>• However, the generalisability of the findings in this section are restricted due to the fact that the school in question has its own separate demographic, ethos and infrastructure, hence, the findings may not apply to another special school</li> </ul>

perhaps emphasising their growing identification as a teacher and the student's desire that this be communicated to others because capitals add emphasis which would also reinforce this professional self-concept. Viewed through Stenhouse's lens of empowering teachers to undertake ongoing curriculum design and evaluation, the commitment to achieving a deep understanding of possible pedagogical approaches is evident.

This attentiveness to shape pedagogy to fulfil the requirements of the curriculum was further expressed in the following:

I would like to introduce a less formulaic lesson structure, where children have more opportunities for divergent thinking before they begin evaluating existing design solutions. I believe the participants will have outputs that show higher instances of creativity and originality. The implications for my future teaching practice are that children need a secure contextual understanding before they embark on divergent thinking over a design problem.

Tara, Design Technology specialist

In this text it is evident that Tara sees herself as a teacher in the future who is able to mobilise her research findings to influence her pedagogy. There is a clear degree of criticality evident pertaining to the existing (formulaic) lesson structure that had been imposed on her. There also seems a degree of duality in how Tara identifies her learners referring to them as children but also as participants. This also suggests that Tara identifies both as a teacher and a researcher since 'participants' is a term usually associated with research.

In terms of student–teachers capability to use the modified CtP approach as a means of viable inquiry, the following is illustrative:

If I have the opportunity, I will go on to develop my knowledge by collecting data from more than one lesson and more than one subject area to validate further facts on the potential of different learning environments over a period of time or perhaps between classes. This would encompass the diverse and complex differences in each learner's abilities. In addition, when in the outdoor area, I would ask the TA to film the children's learning behaviour as I found it challenging to focus on individual learners in a large expanse. I feel that with these adaptations, this research might further inform my future practice and benefit learners by providing diverse environments that attempt to meet the needs of all children.

Linda, Forest School specialist

Linda clearly identifies as a teacher who believes her practice could be further informed by her own research. She mentions 'more than one' twice in the same sentence, suggesting emphasis and the importance of a range of participant situations to validate her practice. Implicitly, she demonstrates identity as a researcher as well as a teacher. Additionally, she shows a commitment to collaborate with other classroom practitioners (in this case, the teaching assistant) to undertake more detailed research. Arguably, she is polarising positively from a position of teaching to that of researching within a shared context. Whilst not speaking of her own teaching in negative terms, her journey towards a shared community shows identification with an alternative group.

Methodologically she shows strong understanding, in terms of the trying to extend her study by exploring additional means of data triangulation and understanding the limitations of undertaking observations in the expanse of the outdoor learning environment. The final sentence of the text reinforces the appreciation that research can be a basis for curriculum development in this case by providing stimulating alternative environments, but this is not guaranteed, as indicated by the word 'might'.

Tara also displays a complex power dynamic. On the one hand, she wants to work with her teaching assistant (TA) to undertake ongoing research to help develop her pedagogy suggesting an equal power dynamic yet on the other hand, the TA is just to film so that Tara can have the information. There is no suggestion that the TA could also be a co-researcher, interpreting data and drawing conclusions, indicating that Tara does not see the TA as a fully

equal partner. This is possibly reflective of a norm of that particular school culture or of the field of teaching more generally where the TA is most certainly described as a secondary role ('assistant' is even in the name), rather than an equal partner in the teaching.

CDA revealed there were some instances where student–teachers appreciated that curriculum development occurs not just as a result of singular interventions but was rather an iterative process which could be in part mediated by the teacher. This is indicated in the text below by the phrase 'I encouraged continuous improvement', which indicated an awareness that positive change can occur over time.

I encouraged the children towards self-mastery as described in Habit 1—take responsibility for your choices, by educating them as to the benefits of PA and the consequences of insufficient PA. Additionally, I encouraged continuous improvement as in Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw.

Thea, Physical Education specialist

This text also shows a strong commitment to enabling children to take responsibility for their own learning by engaging in appropriate physical activity (PA). There is arguably a slight degree of polarization where she positions children as a separate group with a degree of autonomy depicted by the phrase 'self-mastery', where they are given the opportunity to take responsibility. Additionally, Thea has developed her understanding of her role as a teacher to educate children (not performing a definite intervention as previously). It is possible that she sees curriculum development as more of a partnership now, enabling children to make well-informed choices.

## Emancipation and development of autonomy

Within fifteen of the sixteen research report texts, there was significant evidence that the student–teachers were experiencing a sense of change in identity as a result of undertaking their CtP research. This was evident in that many student–teachers initially described themselves as 'trainees' or 'student–teachers' but later in their texts referred to themselves as teachers. This student–teacher arguably displays confidence in her role and identification.

In my own role as a practitioner who meets the recommended government guidelines, I now intend to share my own experiences of PA and its benefits with pupils.

Thea, Physical Education specialist

Thea's report text indicates she is clear about her role. The use of 'own' in addition to 'my' suggests a strong identification with this identity. There is a sense of purpose or urgency represented by the text 'I now intend to share...' There is a repeated use of the phrase 'my own' reinforcing her identification. The power dynamic is complex. The repeated use of 'my own' could additionally suggest she is in a position of power and will share her findings with pupils (who are subordinate) as a means of benefiting pupils' learning. The fact that the student–teacher asserts she will take further action as a result of the CtP research suggests a degree of empowerment. At the same time, she did not choose to describe herself as a teacher, but rather a 'practitioner who meets the recommended government guidelines' suggesting that she positions herself as subject to government policy—she sees herself as in a position of power inside the classroom yet subject to power outside of it. This in itself may also represent a norm of the field of education—being subject to government policy is not negotiable and at the same time the teacher is expected to hold a position of power in the classroom. This may reflect Lim and Cheatham's assertion that Thea is becoming 'habituated to the status quo' (Lim & Cheatham, 2020, p. 5).

It is interesting to note that Tea does not use the term 'required' guidance but merely 'recommended' guidance. There may be some understanding that there is perhaps room for interpretation, which may engage her in negotiating the status quo in the future.

She refers to the way she 'meets' recommended guidelines and in doing so validates herself and articulates her intention to disseminate the results of her study on physical activity (PA) within her own school community. This suggests a sense of empowerment. Further on in her research report, an increased degree of autonomy is evident:

As a primary school teacher I can influence children's levels of PA by promoting the establishment of an 'Active School'.

Thea, Physical Education specialist

This short text suggests significant empowerment 'I can' but also emancipation as she is suggesting not just passive take up but the active establishment of a whole school initiative (Active School) as a result of her CtP research.

Student-teachers demonstrated that although they valued their sense of developing autonomy and agency this was not to be at the cost of suppressing children's voices or perspectives. Beatrix, a Literacy specialist student-teacher described her deployment of a 'mosaic approach' where she prefaced the children's voices and reflected on their developing needs before relaying her findings to the school senior management. This not only demonstrated her growing empowerment but also suggest she had developed means of negotiating the inherent power structures within schools. Throughout the text she demonstrated a respect for the children and what they had to say, which represents a professional norm and value.

## Development of critical dispositions

There was considerable evidence that student-teachers were able to critique the existing curriculum and advocate for curriculum change by means of their own actions. In this case, a student-teacher is articulating her perspectives on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD):

Through ESD teachers can motivate and empower young people to contribute to positive changes, as ESD increases their understanding develops skills and allows children to reflect on their own attitudes and values... there is also a lack of value given to sustainable development within the NC, and this can present challenges in the classroom, as content within Geography can depend on the teacher's beliefs and values (Blessinger & Carfora, 2014; Meadows, 2020). As a primary school teacher, I can implement ESD into the classroom and contribute to positive whole-school changes. This small-scale research was valuable for the school as it sparked a discussion around their curriculum design.

Carla, Geography specialist

Carla's text depicts a degree of polarisation where teachers and young people working together can illicit positive change. She critiques the lack of value placed by curriculum designers with respect to the inclusion of ESD components. Carla also advocates for formal inclusion of ESD within the curriculum as this diminishes the possibility of different teachers beliefs and values prohibiting its coverage. This is somewhat paradoxical, and it indicates teacher empowerment but at the same time suggests what Stenhouse would term as 'teacher-proofing' of the curriculum as a prudent approach (Stenhouse, 1975).

Interestingly, Rosie, an Early Years specialist student–teacher, derived a sense of how curricula are shaped both by society and political policy as a result of her CtP inquiry:

I now have a greater awareness of the historical context of political policy impacting educational policy and the pace of change. I am aware of the national focus on numeracy and literacy and that my time as a teacher will be focused on meeting targets not concerned with creativity.

Rosie, an Early Years specialist student–teacher

Other student–teachers, when formulating their research, gained an awareness of the existence of different curricula within the United Kingdom and appreciated that contextual understanding was an essential component of curriculum design:

Although one may be critical of research from the ETI as it was conducted in a different country under a different curriculum and therefore may not be applicable to an English special school. Nonetheless, I would like to provide clarity to these differing perceptions by exploring the use of iPads in English special schools.

Hugh, ICT specialist

It is interesting to note Hugh speaks in the third person singular (one), which could be an attempt to distance himself from the findings of this particular research since it took place in different country. None the less he questions the applicability of the findings to practice within an English special school which displays a critical disposition. Overall, he sees undertaking critical inquiry as a means of gaining clarity about the findings of other research studies in different contexts.

## Summary of findings

The vast majority of student assignments contained elements of the structures of the discourse of identity, values and norms, polarisation and power relationships, and revealed a commitment and capacity to undertake CtP research. When viewed through the additional lens advocated by Stenhouse of teacher interest and engagement with classroom inquiry leading to emancipation and empowerment associated with critical evaluation, these findings represent a strong illustration of Stenhouse's aspirations for teachers.

## DISCUSSION

With respect to student–teachers' reflection on their ongoing practice, there was clear evidence that they relished opportunities to explore curriculum design and development as a result of engaging with CtP research. The findings resonate with a study of 355 part-time student–teachers from nine universities across the Czech Republic (Stralczynská et al., 2023) who found that approaches to curricula design varied and consisted of both child-centred and developing teacher autonomy stances. Their research described a tendency of student–teachers to accept or rely on pre-existing resources and pre-determined topic choices, however this depended on the age of the student–teacher respondent with older participants preferring to use their own judgement for curricula design. Irrespective of age, the student–teachers in our research showed a strong inclination to afford children choice and ownership of their learning and contribute to learning decisions. Arguably student–teachers do therefore have the capacity to wrest themselves from adherence to rigid, proscribed,

chronologically based established curricula and break out of the 'status quo' described by Lim and Cheatham (2020, p. 5). This supposition is strengthened by the work of Brown and Livstrom (2020) who explored the pedagogical design capacity of pre-service (student) science teachers in the U.S. and found they were able to redesign their own curriculum units with stronger multicultural connections in response to equitable science education reform principals. Whilst this change in student–teacher practice was aligned to a current policy reform and hence did not represent autonomy in the widest sense, it still indicates that student teachers are able to respond to socio-political induced shifts and responses to power-imbalances.

In terms of supporting student–teacher moves towards emancipation and empowerment, this study illustrates that undertaking a CtP research inquiry can afford student–teachers the opportunity to reflect on their classroom practice and personal self-development. This may take the form of making explicit changes in their identity. For example, student–teachers exploring the power dynamics that impact upon their practice, including the implicit hierarchical structures they find themselves within and school or governmental policy, arguably enable them to challenge established approaches to learning, both institutional and personal. This argument is strengthened by the findings of Martos-García and García-Puchades (2023), who afforded postgraduate student–teachers the opportunity to undertake action research (AR) inquiries during their physical education teaching in Spanish secondary schools. Whilst the student–teachers found undertaking AR arduous and at times causing tension with their preparatory work to pass examinations; there were indications that the inquiry had prompted a degree of emancipation for example, students recognising the value of heightened autonomy in their study and on-going professional learning. The importance of developing autonomy is presented in the seminal work by Stenhouse, *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development* (1975, p. 144), who postulated over forty years ago that:

the outstanding characteristics of the extended professional is a capacity for autonomous professional self-development through systematic self-study ... through the testing of ideas by classroom research procedures.

Clearly this statement prefaces both autonomy (in the form of self-study) but also teacher engagement with systematic inquiry. The term 'testing' suggests the requirement for a rigorous examination of evidence, whilst adopting an approach which is tenable within the classroom. We suggest that our form of CtP research fulfils both of these requisites.

There was substantive evidence throughout the student–teacher reports that undertaking a CtP inquiry prompted critique and challenge of established practice and as such supported the acquisition of critical inquiry skills. In addition to the indicative quotes, presented in this article, examples include the rejection of existing data collection tools for example interviewing, which student–teachers felt enacted an improper power-balance between the student–teacher/researcher and the child and critiquing historical curriculum policy. If the teachers of the future are to contribute to curriculum change and educational policy in an informed manner, it stands to reason that they need to be given the opportunity to hone their inquiry skills, particularly with respect to developing criticality. Indeed, our findings resonate strongly with those of teacher–educators in Finland, Holland and Australia, who found that student–teachers who were given the opportunity to undertake classroom-based research displayed positive attitudes and engaged with research to inform their ongoing practice (Aspfors & Eklund, 2017; Guilbert et al., 2016; Van Katwijk et al., 2022). Specifically, Van Katwijk et al., 2022 reported:

Preservice teachers learn to think deeply, look critically, work systematically, link theory and practice, and feel empowered.



These affordances link closely with Stenhouse's aspiration for teacher–researchers who have developed a positive disposition towards research informed practice and who have the capacity for taking ownership of their own on-going self-study and development (Stenhouse, 1975).

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Our findings align with the work of Stenhouse who, even 40 years ago, spoke of the need to have rich opportunities to develop degrees of autonomy and empowerment through classroom research-based projects and our article demonstrates the current and timely relevance of his ideas still. Educationally high-performing countries like Holland, Finland and Australia have a requirement for a research element in their teacher education programmes in contrast to the modest requires of the English ITE curriculum. With the increasingly proscribed and time-consuming nature of components of ITE due to governmental directives, it is challenging to see how opportunities for student–teacher inquiry can be maintained.

Despite these restraints, the findings of our research, showed that student–teachers beliefs about why they teach in a certain way were challenged. They developed a deeper understanding of pedagogy, of the centrality of child voice and about who they were as teachers within the social context of the school. It might be argued that teachers can demonstrate these aspects through execution alone, perhaps through observation of their teaching, but this is often based on tick boxes with minimal engagement with research evidence—we argue they are in a much stronger and more empowered position if they have experience of CtP research at their disposal. Currently, as outlined in the introduction, there is nothing to help develop these skills in teachers (student and early career) in present English ITE programmes, so our initiative would fill this gap. Our contribution to knowledge outlined in this article has implications for ITE design, DfE policy and teaching practice in English schools and arguably beyond. For example, DfE policy and ITE design would benefit from explicit reference to CtP research or a similar form of classroom-based inquiry.

Indeed we argue that the benefits from CtP research are substantive, for example development of teacher identity and articulations of values and beliefs demonstrate that it is a worthwhile investment of time and assists governmental directives.

High-quality teaching as advocated by Husbands and Pearce (2012) is most likely to be realized when student–teachers have been given substantial opportunities to engage with critical evaluation of existing and proposed pedagogical advances. This is more likely to be achieved if student–teachers have developed a sense of autonomy, knowledge of curriculum and critical inquiry skills—all affordances of CtP inquiry.

It is suggested that the present short-term foci of English ITE on the minutia of teacher practice, for example, direct instructional efficacy is unlikely to support either teacher emancipation and agency or give rise to the development of vital skills including research inquiry and evolving a critical teacher disposition. In the middle of a teacher recruitment crisis, initiatives that empower student–teachers and enable them to understand school cultures, particularly in relation to power dynamics, can only be supportive of decisions to remain in the profession.

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There were no known conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors will not share the data.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

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