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Meredith, Margaret, Raymond, Jo, Anderson, Kirsty, Ellis, Paul, Englefield, Ceri, Needham, Ian, Rudman, Rachel, Stephenson, Megan, Woolridge, John and Yeoman, Aimee (2025) Developing a pedagogy of critical reflection and reflexivity on a professional doctorate towards equity, ethics and social justice. London Review of Education, 23 (1).

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London Review of Education

LONDON REVIEW OF EDUCATION

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Research article

Developing a pedagogy of critical reflection and reflexivity on a professional doctorate towards equity, ethics and social justice

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Submission date: 3 June 2025; Acceptance date: 6 October 2025; Publication date: 12 November 2025

How to cite
Meredith, M., Raymond, J., Anderson, K., Ellis, P., Englefield, C., Needham, I., Rudman, R., Stephenson, M., Woolridge, J. and Yeoman, A. (2025). Developing a pedagogy of critical reflection and reflexivity on a professional doctorate towards equity, ethics and social justice. *London Review of Education*, *23*(1), 23. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.23.1.23.

Peer review
This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.23.1.23.

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London Review of Education is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

The Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) is designed for researching practitioners to address problems of practice and to develop theoretically informed practice-based knowledge, based on equity, ethics and social justice, according to the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate. Within the EdD programmes, practitioner reflection is a key characteristic. While extensive literature on reflection in educational programmes exists, there is little literature on how critically reflective approaches might be developed in practice at the beginning of a EdD programme. The article takes the example of the first module on a EdD programme and shows how such approaches can develop and deepen

researching practitioners' (EdD students) understandings of problems of practice. This article contributes to understandings of EdD pedagogy. Co-written with EdD students who have completed their first module of the programme, it includes their first-person responses to the approaches taken to foster critical reflection and reflexivity and offers a model for this form of collaborative writing. The article highlights the importance of considering students' standpoint and positionality as researching practitioners and the value of a critically reflective and reflexive approach which is guided by the challenge of theory.

Keywords Doctorate in Education; EdD; problems of practice; students as co-authors; critical incident analysis; researcher standpoint; collaborative writing

Introduction

Learning from and through reflection are often cited as key to professional doctorate candidates. This article's purpose is to explore the value, impact and pedagogy of a reflective approach of the first taught module in a Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme through students' first-person reflections. To this end, the article is co-written between tutor and students, who each contribute first-person narrative accounts.

The professional doctorate in education

Framed around questions of equity, ethics and social justice, the EdD aims to effectuate solutions to complex problems of practice (The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], 2022). CPED describes these problems as typically being persistent, context-specific issues rooted in professional practice that, when addressed, can lead to improved understanding and outcomes. The EdD is designed to support the development of practice-based knowledge and to recognise theoretically informed practitioner research which, in turn, is expected to lead to meaningful contributions to professional practice (Hawkes and Yerrabati, 2018).

Most EdD programmes attract part-time study from mainly mature and accomplished professionals (Jones, 2018) and usually include a taught phase followed by a supervised practice-based research project, which forms the thesis stage. The taught phase is therefore highly significant in shaping the ethos, expectations and approach of the EdD student when considering and planning the research for their thesis (Dobson and Clark, 2024).

In all professional doctorate programmes, elements of reflection are essential in considering different approaches to challenges and problems within practice (Hayes and Fulton, 2015). Reflection on practice is widely recognised as a core component and is therefore formally integrated into EdD programme structures (Cunningham, 2018; Robinson, 2018).

In the EdD course on which this research is based, 'problems of practice' are understood critically. Identifying underlying power embedded in social structures and cultural mechanisms is seen as part of understanding and challenging such problems and working towards more socially just outcomes. Doctoral candidates tend to place significant value on reflective practice throughout their studies. Engaging deeply with a specific problem of practice through sustained reflection can be a disruptive process, often unsettling existing assumptions. However, this disruption is seen as a necessary step in helping students develop meaningful insights into complex issues in their professional contexts (Cunningham, 2018).

There is limited literature discussion on the pedagogical approaches used in taught EdD programmes. Karen Acton (2023) provides one of the few examples of explicit pedagogical discussion, proposing an approach to the teaching of research methods which draws on 'transformative, active learning pedagogies' (p. 4), contrasting with the more common tutor-led methods in many EdD programmes. Acton cites critical reflection and reflexivity as key aspects of her pedagogical model. Her approach views critical reflection as facilitating moves beyond superficiality towards deeper

transformative learning that can alter professional identity and pedagogical approaches. She integrates critical reflection into the EdD curriculum by designing activities that prompt students to examine both their own and others' viewpoints, allowing them to analyse, interpret and consider alternative perspectives. Reflexivity is understood as students situating themselves within their research. Her approach to critical reflection and reflexivity resonates with our own, which is expanded on below.

In this article we explain a pedagogical approach we used in the first module of an EdD programme in a UK university. This approach was developed to foster critical reflection and reflexivity, in which social justice, understood as equity based on recognition of difference (Honneth, 1996), is an underpinning driver. Using participatory co-writing in the form of EdD students' first-person reflective writing, the article shows how the approach inspired students to reconsider and disrupt their previous assumptions about themselves and their contexts of practice. It demonstrates diverse understandings and expressions of ethics, equity and social justice in contexts of practice which form implicit and explicit aspects of their reflections.

In the article, we refer to the researching practitioners as students. In this article we first consider the rationale underpinning, and the execution of, critical reflection and reflexivity on the first module of an educational doctorate. To give the context of the study, an overview of the pedagogical principles of the module itself is then given along with a rationale for the inclusion of its key aspects. Following this, the study itself and the way in which the article was co-constructed is explained, and the ethical issues involved in the collaborative project are revealed and addressed. In the next section, student responses to the pedagogical approach are written in the first person as the student co-authors each take up the narrative in giving their reflections on some changes to their thinking which were inspired by the approach, and on their problematisation of practice. The conclusion considers ways forward and the limitations of the research.

Reflection, critical reflection and reflexivity on the professional doctorate in education

Reflection on its own can lead to students emphasising the descriptive aspects of practice, applying their focus to problem solving and ways of doing or not doing (Eastman and Maguire, 2015). If the professional doctorate student is to identify problems of practice in a meaningful and transformative way, going beyond description and surface-level problem solving, approaches need to be introduced to move such description into a methodological framework that 'lifts the student's account of their [practice] from the anecdotal' towards the methodological rigour commensurate with doctoral-level study (Hayes and Fulton, 2015, p. 3).

In our view, such rigour necessitates the use or development of theory. Ball (2006) identifies the 'violence' of theory, which serves as a 'reflexive tool within research practice, its role in challenging conservative orthodoxies and closure, parsimony, and simplicity' (p. 9). In successful EdD level work, theory and practice will become mutually informative and interwoven. An awareness of power relationships within education implies that, additionally, this relationship of theory and practice is undertaken within a critical, reflexive framework. Thompson and Thompson (2023) view critical reflection as reflection that has been both deepened and broadened, reflecting Mezirow's frames of reference and meaning structures, respectively (Mezirow, 1978, 1991). Depth arises from looking beneath the surface to identify and challenge the existing knowledge base, assumptions and biases of the individual while breadth expands the context of this deep analysis from the individual to the societal level, paying particular attention to the role and impact of power relations. It is this criticality in reflection which affords potential to shift its focus and purpose from problem solving to emancipation (Reynolds, 1998).

Students engaging in the process of critical reflection have a greater likelihood of taking a more profound and transformative approach to identifying problems of practice. Rather than seeking out 'what works' within existing parameters and assumptions, critically reflective pedagogies can create spaces for students to engage first in 'problem finding' (Sennett, 2009) and problem identification beyond the superficial, as part of the process of addressing problems of practice. This contrasts with launching straight into a simplified 'what works' approach that Biesta (2007, p. 5) argues risks overlooking critical questions about the intended purposes of interventions and whose voices should shape those goals. The process of critical reflection involves developing arguments, interrogating the taken-for-granted assumptions under which much current policy and practice operate and developing the capacity of the

students, as established professionals, to unearth unconscious dynamics of practice (Boncori and Smith, 2019) and power.

As a driver of a social justice, emancipatory purpose also requires researcher reflexivity. Researchers of the social domain concerned only with forms of research need to be aware of the systemic dimension of their own social location, background and the power structures that influence their research (Bourdieu, 1992). The reflexive researcher-practitioner recognises and acknowledges how all aspects of themselves and their contexts influence the way in which they conduct research and create knowledge, according to Sanjakdar and Premier (2023). In this way, researcher positionality within social justice research is a conscious part of the research process; the individual researcher, and their particular standpoint, is positioned front and centre of the research process and their role as protagonist and interpreter of their own and others' actions is not rendered invisible (Eastman and Maguire, 2015).

Reflexivity is an 'unsettling' of the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used to describe reality (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 38) and therefore tends to include a dimension involving personal values and beliefs, and conversations with the self (Cunningham, 2018). With the help of literature and theory, such conversations can provide the function of illuminating practice and enable the student-professional to position their practice and wider context within explanatory frameworks.

We argue from this literature review that reflection can tend to focus on surface-level problem solving. Breadth in critical reflection, however, requires theoretical frameworks that challenge assumptions and examine power relations from individual to societal levels. Reflexivity involves the depth of researchers examining their own social location, values and how their background influences their research. Together, critical reflection and reflexivity help EdD students move beyond surface-level analysis to achieve doctoral-level rigour while working towards social justice purposes in educational practice.

In what follows, we aim to contribute to the discourses of how critical reflection and reflexivity can be purposefully cultivated in practice at the early stages of an EdD programme. We examine how structured opportunities for critical reflection and reflexivity are pedagogically supportive for EdD students to enable them to challenge assumptions and address issues of equity and recognition of difference.

Context of the study

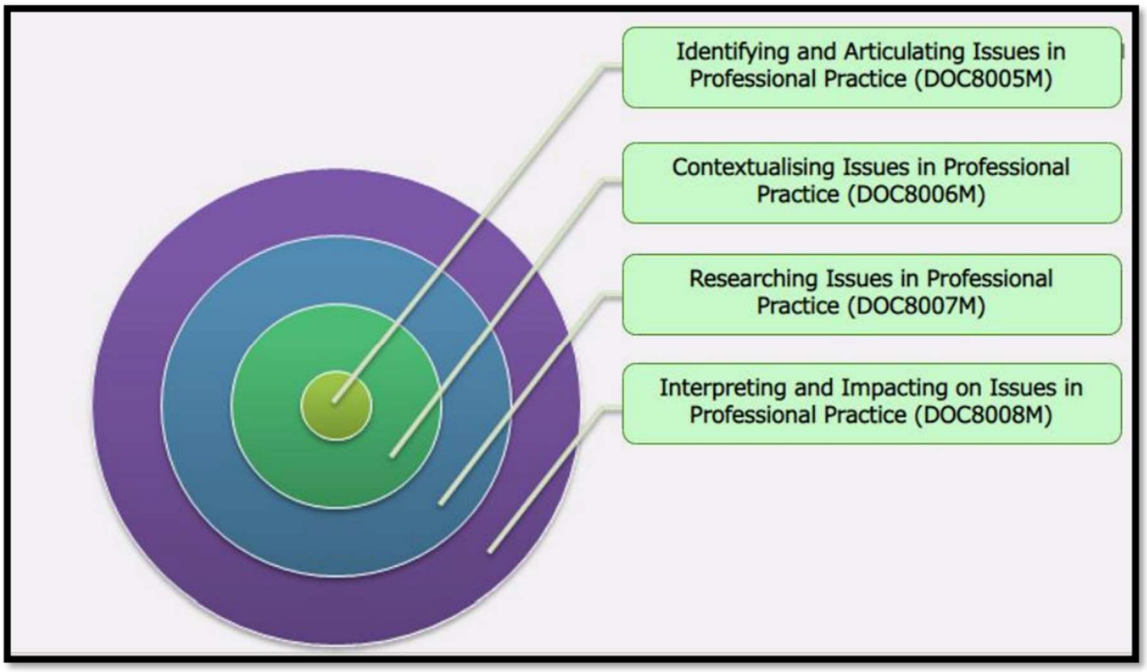
The EdD at York St John University combines both taught and research-based elements across two parts. Part One, in years 1–2, includes four core modules, each of which is focused on acquiring systematic knowledge and engaging in meaningful reflection, interpretation and critique of specific research problematics. Part Two, across years 3–4, focuses on developing original doctoral level research, facilitated through a co-constructive approach with a supervisory team with expertise in the students' specific area of research. The programme is aimed at experienced professionals working in the broad area of education, which may include all levels of formal or informal education, as well as education-related services or allied disciplines such as health or social care. It is relevant for those with an interest in critically examining their professional practice and using this to inform change through focusing on addressing problems of practice, as discussed above. Figure 1 shows the structure for Part One of the programme.

This article draws on the module entitled 'Identifying the self in practice'. The first of four taught modules, its location at the heart of the taught programme acknowledges the centrality of the researching practitioner within the EdD experience in the institution. This first module aims to assist students in their journey through a series of critical reflections, linking their professional biographies, their practice and how theory can illuminate and challenge practice. Critical reflection operates as a strategic, pedagogic anchor throughout the remaining taught modules acknowledging, and leveraging, the students' professional experience throughout the stages of their development.

The programme learning outcomes relevant to module 1 include:

- demonstrating a critical understanding of recent professional developments and current theoretical frameworks which have direct relevance to professional practice in education and the student's professional context
- engaging in reflective processes and interpreting, where appropriate, personal, local, organisational, national, cultural and international factors reflexively to provide insight into the student's own professional practice and research problematics.

Figure 1. Structure of the York St John University EdD programme (Source: York St John University, 2025)



The module is taught face-to-face over four consecutive days, with a fifth day's teaching taking place online. The average group size is around eight students. The module is sequenced in the following way:

- Using Diane Reay's (2017) book *Miseducation* and feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1992), students are encouraged to consider their social location as researching professionals, and the insights their partiality can bring to their work. Students are invited to discuss, critique and contest Pauly Morgan's (1996) 'Intersecting axes of privilege, domination and oppression' diagram (p. 107) which explores systemic power relationships and possibilities of equity by placing 14 characteristics such as 'male', 'white', 'able-bodied', 'credentialised', 'young', 'upper and upper-middle class' above a line, representing domination. Below the line, representing oppression, each characteristic's counterpart is placed: 'female', 'people of colour', 'persons with disabilities', 'nonliterate', 'old', 'working class – poor'.
    - *Rationale*: to critically analyse previously uninterrogated personal and professional identities and to challenge assumptions that social research can ever be neutral or objective, enabling new perspectives on 'problem finding' (Sennett, 2009); to enable the exploration of students' 'social location' (Bourdieu, 1992) – and the power structures intrinsic to this – as researchers and professionals. This element of the course represents the 'broadening' and 'deepening' of analysis, in Mezirow's (1978, 1991) terms, considering the societal level, the role and impact of power relations and the researcher's location within this.
- This 'insider view' of a context of practice is located within autoethnography.
    - *Rationale*: autoethnography is explained and justified as a 'first person' research methodology which requires researcher visibility, giving the researcher the opportunity to gain an insight into the social and cultural complexities of their own experience (Holman Jones et al., 2013). It is therefore well suited to the EdD student investigating problems of practice and promotes the 'conversations with the self' (Cunningham, 2018) referred to earlier. It offers a 'reflexive means through which Professional Doctorate students can deliberately and consciously embed themselves within theoretical perspectives' and consider the application of these perspectives to their practice (Hayes and Fulton, 2015, p. 4). It involves Mezirow's

'deepening' of reflection to examine the values and assumptions of the student. To address the risk of such reflection rendering invisible the power structures that underpin practice and to challenge the temptation towards 'simplicity' and 'closure' referred to earlier (Ball, 2006), consideration of this methodology is deliberately timetabled after the sessions in which student positionality is examined.

- Identification and discussion of a professional critical incident, recounted in an autoethnographical way.
    - *Rationale*: critical incident analysis was the method used to focus the students' autoethnographic approach and aid the development of critical reflection and reflexivity. It involves placing the self at the centre of the incident and consideration of one's values-based stance towards the incident. As Tripp (2012) explains, the incidents in themselves may not be dramatic or 'critical', but rather, mundane events that are rendered critical through their subsequent analysis and are indicative of 'significant underlying trends, motives or structures' (Gray, 2007). Green Lister and Crisp's (2007) approach is used, which includes an account of the incident, consideration of the student's initial responses to it, issues and dilemmas highlighted by it, personal learning from it and theories that helped (or might have helped) make sense of it.
- Overview of some educational and sociological theorists and philosophers. Broad overviews of theories and theorists, such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Fricker and Arendt are introduced to students. In the iteration of the module explained, no theorists from the global south were used in this session, an omission reflected on in the conclusion.
    - *Rationale*: theories are introduced as reflective tools to create spaces for the students to participate in a meaning-making process rather than 'simply be subject to the meaning of others', to be challenged and to struggle with the frustrations to certainty that the theories present, to be 'made uncomfortable' and to have the opportunity to 'hold on to [when] it is like the author stretches a hand out from the page towards my own hand, and I think "yes, I think that too, that expresses something that I have never been able to quite capture into words"' (Ball, 2006, p. 5). Theory is also used to unsettle taken-for-granted practices and assumptions, such as interrogating the 'conservative orthodoxies' (Ball, 2006) of epistemologies legitimised in education, and the power interests represented by dominant discourses.

The module was conducted through dialogue between students and tutors. At each stage, students were invited to discuss issues such as 'how might this be relevant to your context?', 'How might it illuminate tensions you experience in your professional role?' and 'How does this change your perspective?' As well as time for dialogue with others, time is also given for the conversations with the self, referred to above, and with the literature through individual study and writing time. The assignment continues this process of critical self-reflection and reflexivity with an essay titled 'Identify one significant issue in your professional practice that you would wish to explore critically, blending theory, personal experience and wider contextual issues', requiring the students to position themselves as agents and engage reflexively with their experience in a way that interweaves critical understanding of the educational cultures in which they operate.

Following the 'residential' week, students are invited to join online peer support meetings with a tutor approximately every four weeks to discuss their thinking, reading and writing towards their assignment, enabling cementing of reflexive approaches and the students' use of theory to explain and unsettle assumptions and practice.

The study

Students who had completed Module 1 in the 2022–3, and the 2023–4 cohorts (five and eleven students, respectively) were invited by their tutor, Margaret, to co-author this article. They were asked to write around 500 words in response to the following questions raised by the tutor: (i) Could you identify any ways the process of self-reflection/self-study and its theorisation changed your thinking about your practice, and perhaps in some way has sown the seeds of changing your practice? (ii) As this process can

be personally challenging, could you identify some of the challenges you experienced specific to this approach?

Eleven students responded affirmatively to the invitation, although two subsequently needed to withdraw for personal reasons. In addition, the students were invited to participate in making sense of the writing as data and in crafting the article if they wished. One student, Jo, put herself forward for this phase.

This analysis and creating the direction of the article involved an iterative and abductive process of reading the students' reflections and examining published literature around the broad areas of the questions raised to the students – reflection, and the value of theory, changes to thinking and practice, and challenges of the approach.

Margaret and Jo used reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the students' reflections, valuing its alignment with our reflexive, subjective approach (Braun and Clarke, 2019), both engaging with the data independently at first, immersing ourselves in the reflections before generating initial codes.

We then came together several times to discuss and refine potential themes, collaboratively agreeing on the final themes. Finally, we divided the themes between us for initial drafting, co-authoring the analysis throughout through sharing suggestions and iteratively developing the writing in light of other emerging sections.

Writing the article

The article employs a multivocal approach (Lapadat, 2017), in which the module tutor and EdD students collaborate as co-authors and co-constructors of knowledge. The process of writing the article aimed to be consistent with the participatory and relational approach of the EdD (Dobson and Clark, 2024). Having read students' writing for the piece, Margaret began, and Jo developed, the literature review with the emerging themes in mind. The process of analysing and crafting the students' writings into the article was iterative between Margaret and Jo, mainly by alternating email commentary and adapting or developing each other's latest version. In generating the writing, some differences emerged in the potential aim and purpose of the article, in identifying its key insights and in issues around how to reflect changing voices. While Jo, as student, left final decisions to Margaret as tutor, the combination of both student and tutor input at this stage was vital to the article's authenticity. The final article reflects significant input from both lead authors individually and in dialogue. They also discussed when the article had enough coherent form as a draft to share and ask for comment from all participating authors. At this stage and over time, individuals came forward with suggestions and editing support. All signalled agreement with the submitted version.

This process recognises Kirkpatrick et al.'s (2014) observation that in collaborative writing, authors write 'into some kind of space' (p. 7). In our case the 'space' was the invitation to write 500 words in response to questions about the module, 'but then somebody has to sweep up the space and gather the writing together into a piece of cloth' (p. 7): by drawing out themes and weaving them together. The process of gathering the individual contributions into a woven whole so that each author was clearly contributing to the final shape, colour and texture of a whole tapestry, or article, was carried out by Margaret and Jo. In addition, Paul responded to a further invitation to edit the final article.

Hyatt and Hayes (2020) challenge the traditional expert/novice model for co-authoring between tutors and students. They propose a decentred doctoral pedagogy that relies on designing purposeful environments with a view to reshaping understandings through collaboration between students and staff (p. 21). Co-authoring, in our article, can be seen as a pedagogy which creates such a purposeful environment. Such co-authoring brings internal coherence as it aligns the methodology of the article with the underpinning social justice and participatory pedagogy of the EdD; power imbalances inherent in the expert/novice apprenticeship model are reduced and multivocality embraces the contribution of each co-author to knowledge production.

Ethical issues

To effectively mitigate the inherent power relationship between the tutor and students whose assignments she would assess, invitations to participate were deliberately withheld until after module completion and assessment processes concluded. Prior to student recruitment, the programme director was consulted in their gatekeeper capacity, providing both guidance and formal authorisation to

proceed with the project. Participating students were informed that any peers involved in analysis of the writing would have access to their unedited reflections. Throughout the analysis and article development process, numerical identifiers replaced student names attached to their writing to maintain confidentiality, with individual authorisation being secured from each student before distribution of the first draft containing thematically organised content for review and refinement. Students maintained autonomy in selecting their identification method and retained the right to withdraw their contributions at any point before final submission. The process gained relevant prior university ethics committee approval.

Student responses to the pedagogical approach on the EdD

The reflections are organised into the following themes: prior experiences of reflection and reflexivity; engagement with critical reflection and reflexivity; the role of theorisation within a reflexive approach; and challenges encountered.

Prior experiences of reflection and reflexivity

Several of us commented on our experiences of reflection as part of our practice prior to undertaking this module, each with a slightly different focus. For example, Kirsty focused on understanding as part of her reflection, in particular, when working with student teachers, '"why" lessons were successful (and of course why not)'.

Aimée, who works in professional services in higher education, explains how she used reflection to identify positive and negative elements of her own practice. She writes:

> I admittedly find self-reflection a space in which I often significantly criticise myself. I hyperfocus on identifying and interrogating the negatives of my practice or personal thinking, almost 'attacking' myself, in the hope that this appears to be a more constructive form of self-reflection, than if I was to for the majority praise my positive areas of practice.

The commonalities in our comments include that they are practical and personal in scope, they involve reviewing actions and outcomes and focus on what happened, why and how to change or improve practice in the future. Additionally, Aimée comments on how her own higher education experience instituted a practice of free-writing reflection. She writes:

> I find the process of actually sitting down and writing a self-reflective piece quite easy to do though. My thoughts and feelings flood out onto paper – this was drilled into me from an early stage of my university education, where I studied Drama: Education & Community. We were taught from the first week of our course to spend time reflecting on our practice and to 'free-write' for a set amount of time … it has actually been a part of my personal practice for over six years to make and protect time to self-reflect.

Reflection forms an important part of the professional practice of all of us. However, the extended frames of reference and meaning structures prompted by the module give rise to qualitatively different reflections, as shown in the following section.

Engagement with critical reflection and reflexivity: extending our frames of reference and meaning structures

As explained earlier, critical reflection is that which has been deepened and broadened: deepened from expanding frames of references and looking beneath the surface to identify and challenge the existing knowledge base and assumptions and biases underpinning it; while breadth expands the context of analysis from the individual to wider society, and with regard to the role and impact of power relations. Reflexivity involves awareness of how the positionality of the individual in their context influences the way they conduct themselves in their practice and includes a dimension of personal beliefs.

Both increased depth and breadth are evident from our written reflections. For example, Paul's expanding frames of reference involved a journey of challenging understandings of the nature of knowledge itself. As a secondary school science teacher, he explains:

> I made a transition from a scientific background to a new and different world of research paradigms. The biggest impact the EdD module had on me was the ideas around these approaches – the idea of how I think about 'knowledge' and what is 'true' is based on my experiences, upbringing and past/current situations. I was able to reflect on my own interpretations and understandings of the world and how influential factors such as socioeconomic upbringing or lifestyle contribute to those interpretations and understandings of the world and one's place in it; appreciating the importance of positionality shaping an individual's lens.

Some of us saw our practice and the problems we had identified in our critical incidents in a broader political and cultural context. For example, John, who is from an aspiring middle-class family and now works in a further education college, writes:

> Critical incident analysis was pivotal for me in relation to extending meaning structures through understanding of the complexities surrounding assessments in education and how this method of reflection required me to critically analyse the factors influencing my previous practices and to consider how social, political and cultural structures impact the education system. Engaging with this process led me to recognise the problematic nature of high-stakes assessments and the potential harm they can cause to students. Through the critical incident analysis, I became increasingly aware of how assessment practices can contribute to student anxiety and inequalities, particularly for those with additional needs, such as anxiety or autism.

Ian reflects on specific aspects of the broader context he was drawn towards and how this led him to reconsider the source and nature of the issue he had analysed in his critical incident, in a renewed endeavour of problem finding (Sennett, 2009). He takes up the narrative:

> Having recently become a teacher educator, and previously been a head of department in a north of England faith school, the assignment helped me to discover, understand and then use many of the educational and philosophical theories associated with power, culture and knowledge; this in turn has changed my practice through a deeper understanding of many of the issues at play and especially in relation to social and systemic injustice. As a middle-aged white male from a working-class background, I began to understand issues around neo-liberalism and its implications on pre-school teachers who lacked the Habitus of the English school system. This was through deeper research into issues such as privatisation, performativity, deregulation, individualisation, globalisation, etc. and the impact that these have had on the educational policy landscape. In turn this opened up a new line of thinking for me and led me to research authors such as Ball and Apple in greater detail.

An increased awareness of our positionality and how it has shaped us and informs our understandings of our practice is highlighted by several of us. For example, the experience of critical reflection was used retrospectively by Megan, who was educated in the comprehensive state sector, and uncovered some unconscious dynamics of her practice (Boncori and Smith, 2019) to arrive at a deeper understanding of her standpoint as an educator. She writes:

> It prompted me to view my past experiences through a bigger-picture context. I became fascinated in tracing back to experiences I had had as a child with undiagnosed dyslexia in the primary and secondary education system in the 1970s and 80s. I had always recognised that those experiences shaped me in some way, but I had never connected them up to the bigger picture. Issues of social justice, social mobility, gender stereotyping and socio-economic constraints became clearer and more defined, and through this in-depth reflection I began to realise how they linked to the very fibre of my moral being. Putting myself at the centre and looking outwards was a revelation, previously I had always imagined myself looking inwards from the outside.

Megan, identifying how previous experiences shaped her identity and values throughout 20 years as a primary teacher, continues:

> It has not only influenced my approach to teaching and assessment but also reinforced my commitment to advocating for a fairer education system. While I am aware of the challenges and limitations within the sector, I am motivated to continue exploring ways to support my students effectively and to challenge practices and policies that do not serve their best interests. The course has provided me with both the tools and the critical perspective needed to navigate and influence the educational landscape more thoughtfully and purposefully.

Megan was able to identify how previous experiences had shaped her identity and values. She writes:

> As an individual who always struggled (and still does) with academic writing I was pleased to hear that we would be using an autoethnographic approach as a way into conceptualising an issue in education. Happy days, I thought. Once I began to read further into the subject and the materials, particularly the work of Diane Reay, I realised that I had been using some form of reflexive autoethnography throughout my whole teaching career (without realising it). I'd always look carefully at a situation to consider what I believed was happening, and what I could do at that moment in time to bring about some recognisable change to my practice. However, I'd always kept myself at distance … never truly immersed. Only when I began delving further into the significance and impact on the researcher themselves during the autoethnographic process did I begin to understand and unpack how previous experiences had impacted and influenced both my professional and personal life. Reviewing the critical incident through an autoethnographic lens (and being able to write in the first person) helped me recognise the very essence of the kind of teacher and subsequent teacher educator I had always been and will always be.

Rachel, a state-educated teacher educator from a white middle-class background, writes:

> Using autoethnography made me think clearly about bias (and advantage) in my own position which I had never fully acknowledged before. This autoethnographic approach was hugely beneficial in helping me to recognise the influence my own prior, lived experiences might have on future research.

She highlights the importance of building reflexivity into the design process of research:

> The whole approach of autoethnography reframed my thinking. I embarked on the educational doctorate with some solid experience of writing for different audiences. I had co-authored two textbooks and contributed two chapters to books aimed at those people beginning their careers as teachers. To that end, I felt quite confident about writing. I had not anticipated or thought through the fact that my prior experience of writing was quite neutral and detached because I had been writing about something else. I had never written for academic reasons (or for publication) about myself and my own standpoint. I used critical race theory in my assignment as I was very conscious of bias and the White Western position I inhabit.
>
> The critical incidents I wrote encouraged me to consider my own teaching career and how my experiences had shaped the perspective I continue to have when working with trainee teachers in my everyday work. The whole approach of autoethnography reframed my thinking about what academic writing might be like and made it very clear to me that my own position as a researcher needs to be fully understood before actually doing the research!

Ceri, a teacher who has spent her career working in special schools, considers positionality of the researcher in relation to claims of objectivity. She explains:

> Using autoethnography moved my thinking away from searching for objective answers to my concerns, towards viewing myself and my experiences as part of an ongoing conversation which seeks to make sense of them. I work with children with PMLD [profound and multiple learning difficulties], an epistemically vulnerable group, who are frequently subject to people advocating on their behalf. This makes it critical that researchers are transparent about how their own positionality and intentions influence their stance and avoid claims of objectivity (Adams et al., 2015).

Her thinking experienced a transformation from a prior focus on practice and a search for the 'correct' answers towards a focus on uncertainty as an opportunity for reflexivity. She continues:

> As part of the Module 1 assignment, I used an autoethnographic narrative approach to investigate and reflect on issues in my professional practice that had caused a lot of uncertainty. Rather than only engaging with what other researchers had said about the issue, the assignment guided me towards exploring the uncertainty itself and the role that this can have as a tool for reflexivity. Whilst my original perspective valued 'authoritative voices', this new perspective began to recognise that an exploration of my own understanding (including my uncertainty) could also contribute to the process of gaining insight into the issue.

Acknowledging her own influence on her writing, Aimée explains:

> I find self-reflection (reflexivity) a useful framing tool for academic papers as it 'sets the scene' for readers and allows them to understand where you are coming from with your writing. The emotional undertext that self-reflective writing offers cannot be underestimated and I believe that the use of self-reflective writing as a framework for, or to be interlaced within, academic papers is important in creating relatable and impactful research. My self-reflection section of my paper, which utilised critical incident theory, allowed me to explain the rationale for my chosen topic and why it was so important to me. Importantly, it also allowed me to assert my positioning and the context of my paper to the reader, which allowed for potential biases to be highlighted and caveats to be given.

The reflections demonstrate extended frames of reference and meaning structures enabling transformation of thinking around the self-as-agent in research and professional contexts, around problems of practice and problem (re-)identification. We will now consider the role of theory in this process.

The role of theorisation within a reflexive approach

We each used educational or sociological theory and/or philosophy to explain and illuminate practice in our critical incident and highlight the importance of the interplay between these two elements within a reflexive approach. Each of our incidents had raised personal and professional concerns.

Collectively, we all used theorisation in at least one of three main ways in our work:

1. critiquing the contexts which worked against equity in education in our specific professional contexts, and which were exemplified in each of our critical incidents
2. grappling with situations that had been personally troubling and viewing them against a backdrop of wider social and political currents that set the stage for these more 'one-off' incidents
3. becoming a lens which caused us to question and unsettle our assumptions.

As an example of the first of these elements, Paul writes:

> Reflecting on my background as a White working-class boy and professional experiences as a secondary school science teacher, I began investigating White working-class boys' disengagement from the secondary school science curriculum. Using Bourdieu's work on social reproduction and symbolic violence, I examined ideas of meritocracy and social mobility in policy and practice. I argue that disengaging behaviours are an oppositional result of schools rewarding students who take on and reproduce ideals of the middle class rather than the boys' own form of obtaining what they consider as having transferable economic value.

Using Fricker's (2007) epistemic injustice lens, Ceri explains:

> I considered how an over-reliance on formal augmentative and alternative communication may be an attempt to address epistemic injustice towards people with profound and multiple learning difficulties. I argue this attempt is misguided and further entrenches epistemic injustice by restricting communication to rigidly defined systems and potentially overlooking or undervaluing more fluid and flexible forms of expression that cannot be so easily categorised.

As an example of our second use of theory, grappling with personally troubling situations, Aimée used Honneth's (1996) theory of recognition to illuminate her embodied experiences of the impact of perceived hierarchies within different professional roles in higher education.

Jo, a retired senior leader in further education, writes:

> the self-reflection process, and the associated theorisation, turned into an iterative interaction between the two, which led my thinking to deeper levels, each with more nuance. The theoretical framework I used in this module provided me with the tools I needed to make sense of my experience. I used my theoretical lens in a bi-directional manner; I used Bourdieusian theory to offer a perspective on my own experiences whilst simultaneously using the lens of my own experience to offer a perspective on Bourdieu's theories and their real-world applicability in a single case.

The third way in which some of us found theory an illuminating tool in the reflexive process was in the questioning and unsettling of our existing assumptions.

For example, Kirsty, a teacher educator and consultant with five years' experience in Southeast Asia was confronted by the possibility that her beliefs, founded in feminism and focused on equity, were less inclusive than she had previously thought. She writes:

> It was an uncomfortable experience which extended the depth of challenge to my beliefs and subconscious bias as it resulted in my questioning, retrospectively, my practice within this extended frame of reference in a way I had not previously experienced. I believed myself to be an inclusive practitioner, and, during the time I worked in China, I consciously aimed to respect local staff and their approaches. In my role, I worked closely with Chinese middle leaders to support and develop their confidence working with expat staff. Through reflecting on these vignettes using Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice, I started to recognise that the approach used by expat staff was a deficit model. The underlying idea was that local staff needed to understand expat staff and their practices in order to better manage the co-existing teaching styles and shared understanding. Through examining this in the vignettes I developed, I began to rethink this approach, and could see that it was likely that although happening subconsciously, or perhaps even unconsciously, it was still the case that one approach (Western) was presented as the 'right' approach, which the local staff could not know well-enough as a result of the gaps in their knowledge, which, as I understand Fricker, is epistemic injustice. The local staff in international schools in China are then possibly oppressed as a result of not having a 'Western' approach to teaching.

Theory in these accounts has a revelatory function – both as illuminator enabling sense making, and as a disruptor prompting us to see the familiar in troubling ways.

Challenges we encountered using reflexive approaches

Ian draws attention to the personal nature of the subject matter being scrutinised by the autoethnographic reflexive researcher. He explains:

> Because of the personal nature of the subject matter, I found it very cathartic, revealing and liberating to use autoethnography and positionality in this way. I felt I was able to use my subjectivity as a tool for uncovering what were potentially uncomfortable truths. My intention was that the use of my own biases and preferences could be viewed as a strength of my research rather than a barrier to its veracity.

However, a visceral emotional reaction to reflecting on an episode in one's professional life also needs to be borne in mind, and articulating and interrogating critical incidents is not something that can be taken lightly. Jo explains:

> My initial response to the critical incident was powerfully negative and painful. The combination of self-reflection and theorisation enabled a narrative reconstruction of the incident through which much of the affective response dissipated.

Two further challenges of the focus on the self are identified by Jo: first, the possibility of 'self-indulgence'. To counter this, she explains:

> I kept autobiographical content in the assignment to the optimal level necessary to set my analysis in context for the reader. Second, that a consciousness of the fallibility of memory and that the truth of my experience is only *a* truth, my subjective truth, and may not be the same as that of others who shared the same time and space (Tullis Owen et al., 2009). With this in mind, within my assignment, I shaded some truths and ignored others in the interests of protecting the others (Fine, 1993).

Reflexive approaches, such as autoethnography, are seen here to be powerful tools which unsettle the comfortable distancing of self from tensions in educational practice. Both Ian and Jo allude to coming to 'own' their stories through the challenge of reflexivity, towards to cathartic resolution.

Conclusion, ways forward and limitations

This article has considered pedagogical practice towards 'equity, ethics and social justice' on an initial EdD module. Featuring first-person, reflective accounts from student-co-authors, it makes an original contribution to understandings of pedagogy in the practice of critical reflection and reflexivity on an EdD course. It has considered how students' investigations of their positionality and social location, using theory as a lens, can illuminate and disrupt understandings of their professional practice and generate a re-identification of problems within that practice. In this way, the article argues that this approach to the course has been transformational to students' conceptualisations of their practice and initiates the path to the transformative potential of the EdD as a programme towards 'equity, ethics and social justice'.

Although not explicitly referred to in the module or in the reflective task, the students' reflections are infused with problems of practice which, implicitly or explicitly, grapple with inequitable situations in education and those in which people are misrecognised (Honneth, 1996). This impetus is strongly reflected in their writing for this article, expressed in, for example, disquiet around others speaking on behalf of pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties and the potential epistemic injustice this represents, in considerations of autistic students experiencing inequitable access to methods of assessment, and White working-class boys' disengagement from the school curriculum being viewed through the lens of social reproduction and symbolic violence in relation to middle-class values.

It reveals students articulating the disruption to previous ways of understanding the world they experienced through, for example, their changing understandings about how knowledge can be generated and what can be considered 'true' and the unsettling experience of realising how a 'deficit model' has underpinned aspects of previous professional practice.

Education to develop doctoral-level (and other) researchers often emphasises a removal of self from the research process, and the assumption that it is possible and desirable to be detached as an educational researcher from the research. This article takes the opposite view. It has highlighted the significance of the critical reflexivity of the researcher. Interrogating positionality, particularly in relation to power, has given students a more developed sense of how their standpoint is influential in all aspects of practice. Considering the researcher's social location in terms of power in readily identifiable ways and opening the space for discussion, critique and nuancing of this approach, enabled profound reflexivity. Employing an autoethnographic methodology meant there could be no removing of self from the studied phenomenon.

The use of theory within the critical reflective approach has enabled students to articulate and sharpen their critiques of barriers to equity in education which were sometimes previously tacit or unnoticed. In this sense using theory has developed criticality. Also apparent has been a liberating quality (hooks, 1991) towards making sense of troubling situations in professional contexts. Using theory has also engendered disruption and the unsettling of assumptions. We advocate for such an approach to preparation for independent research on research degrees. However, the explicated process has taken place with a relatively small cohort of students, and we realise it may require modification with larger cohorts where reflexivity might feel riskier.

As co-authors of the article, we all classify ourselves as White British. The theorists used for discussion in this iteration of the module are located in Western epistemic traditions. In future iterations of the module other theorists who can illuminate educational or research practice and policy from other

geo-cultural contexts will be used, such as Castro-Gómez's (2021) concept of 'the hubris of the zero point epistemology' in considering social location, and Said's (2003) Orientalism to illuminate thinking about the 'other' in education. Theory which includes intersectional approaches will also be considered.

This article started from a tutor question about students' experiences of reflection. The students' writing was woven together through tutor–student collaboration, with the tutor and one student taking the lead early on and another leading on editing the final article. A fully participatory approach would have perhaps started with eliciting student questions and focus points for writing, and this is something that could be explored in future research.

The collaborative nature of the writing process, beyond the initial reflective writing and comments on draft versions, was challenging due to the time pressures faced by EdD students in demanding professional roles. A way forward to explore would be to offer online meetings with students, perhaps one-to-one and at different stages in the development of the article, to discuss a particular section towards generating additional insights. This would delimit time commitments, rather than the open-ended nature of engaging in extra writing. The specific contributions made by students could be seen as limitations of co-authoring, but we choose to see them as challenging the norm of participants positioned as 'data' rather than co-contributors whose written insights shaped the article.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Professor Tom Dobson for his comments on an early draft of this article. They would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers from the *London Review of Education* for their insightful comments which led to improvements in the article.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the School of Education, Language and Psychology of York St John University ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.23.1.23