

Close to Practice Research:
What is it, and how can its quality be
improved?

Dominic Wyse and Chris Brown

Theory-practice: A long history

- *technē* (art, craft or skill)
- *phronēsis* (practical wisdom, particularly in organising one's life or organising aspects of society)

(Preus, 2007; Dunne, 1997).

Theory-practice: A long history

“The teaching of education as an undifferentiated field has been largely supplanted by the teaching of constituent disciplines. Philosophy, psychology and sociology are virtually everywhere represented

...

This change in curriculum has increased the rigour and the intellectual tone of education courses. It has done little for their relevance to the problem of improving the practice of teaching.

(Stenhouse, 1975, p. vii)

The BERA Close-to-Practice Research Project

- REF 2014 education sub-panel: ‘practice-focussed’ or ‘close-to-practice’ (CtP) research was variable in quality.
- BERA commissioned research through CtP steering group .
- Research team (Dominic Wyse; Chris Brown; Sandy Oliver; Ximena Poblete) and advisory group.
- BERA Steering Group – met regularly with research team

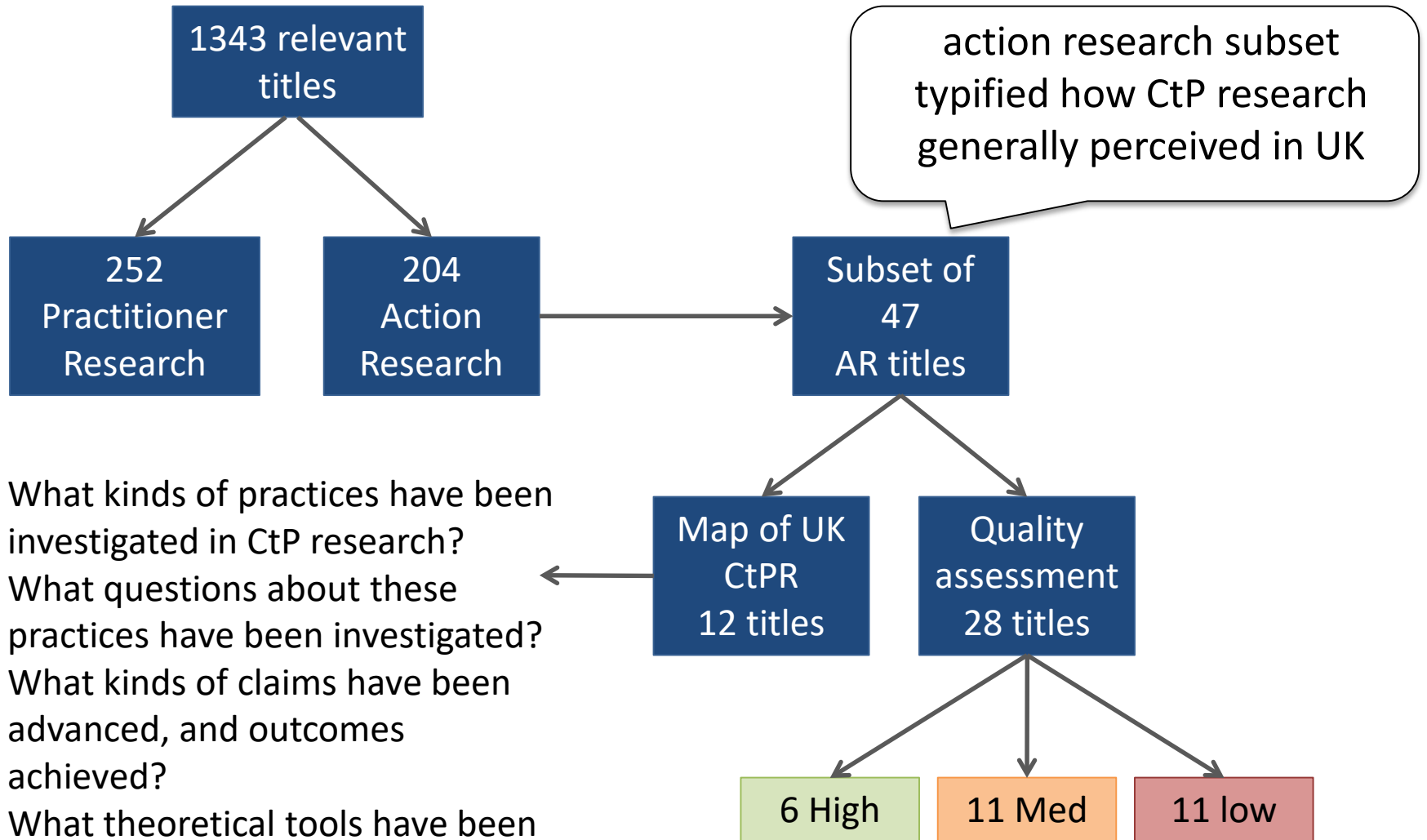
The BERA Close-to-Practice Research Project

- 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF): proportion of research outputs in education judged as 'world-leading' (4*) broadly matched those of other 'units of assessment' (UoAs) within the social sciences.
- Significantly larger proportion of lower-graded outputs (2*, 1* and 'U') in education than in other social science UOAs.
- Furthermore, of all UOAs, education submitted the lowest proportion of higher education institution staff to the REF (as indicated by HESA returns).

Methodology of CtP study

1. A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) of published research papers that focussed on close-to-practice (CtP) research to examine **traditions, focus and quality**. These papers were of two main types:
 - those that focussed on the methodology of CtP research;
 - findings from research that was close to practice.
2. Seven interviews with people who had relevant knowledge and experience in relation to CtP research and its qualities. The aim of the interviews was to explore **dimensions of CtP research**.

REA: Map & quality assessment



1. What kinds of practices have been investigated in CtP research?
2. What questions about these practices have been investigated?
3. What kinds of claims have been advanced, and outcomes achieved?
4. What theoretical tools have been drawn upon?

Interviewees

- **Type 1.** People who work and write in a CtP research tradition and have something to say re value & complexities
- **Type 2.** People who might have insights into the structural difficulties that impact on capacity building
- **Type 3.** People whose roles give them insight into the quality of CtP research

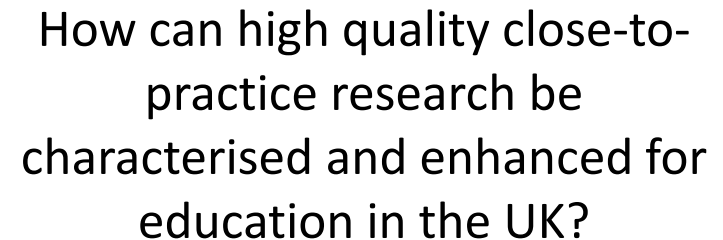
Interview Questions

The interview consisted of six questions that sought the opinion and thoughts of interviewees about the following dimensions of CtP research:

1. definition of CtP research
2. identification of traditions of CtP research
3. factors that could determine and enhance quality criteria for CtP research
4. comparison between experiences in different nations of the UK
5. the role of CtP research in different phases of education and educational settings
6. ways in which BERA could support the development of CtP research.

Findings (main traditions)

- action research
- design-based research,
- evidence-informed practice,
- K* (Knowledge mobilisation; transfer; exchange)
- lesson study,
- practitioner research,
- research learning communities



How can high quality close-to-practice research be characterised and enhanced for education in the UK?

Some have more established and explicit quality criteria than others

Quality Assessment of CtP Studies

Close-to-practice quality	Number of articles
Low	11
Medium	11
High	6
Total	28

Findings (quality of selected studies)

Stronger studies:

- original contribution, e.g. to an aspect of teaching;
- original contribution of the study was made explicit;
- robust use of the methodology;
- sufficient theorisation was evident throughout;

Weaker studies:

- findings that were too descriptive
- research that was under-theorised
- lack of detail in the description of the methodology and methods of the study.
- small-scale of the study not offset by depth of analysis and/or theorisation

Selected recommendations

- Investigate structures through which BERA could support the development of high-quality CtP research in education
- Engage with networks of researchers and practitioners as partners in driving, conducting, reporting and using research.
- Provide guidance on the quality of CtP research in relation to originality, significance and rigour.
- Articulate strategies and career development opportunities for close-to-practice researchers in universities that are likely to support the development of their methodological knowledge.
- Support universities to maintain and strengthen the PhD-by-publication route to a doctorate as one that can result in more efficient use of academic time.
- Engage with practitioners from schools, and researchers, to explore the methodological aspects of CtP research.
- Engage with some of the new sites for research, such as research school networks and other societal developments, to promote high-quality CtP research.
- Engage with senior figures in universities to raise awareness of high-quality CtP research and its potential in REF-related university processes, and in the development of education as a discipline.