“We Have to Play the Game”
Metaphorical language and its effects within discourses of quality, mentoring and disadvantage in Initial Teacher Training and Education (ITTE)

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Contents

List of Figures *5*

List of Tables *5*

Abstract *6*

Acknowledgements *7*

Abbreviations *8*

Chapter 1: The Quality Problem *9*

1.1 Introduction **9**

1.2 "There is nothing else to do but focus on quality" **13**

1.3 Quality Teaching and Quality Mentoring in ITTE **15**

1.3.1 Mentoring in ITTE Policy 16

1.3.2 Quality, Mentoring and Disadvantage 19

1.3.3 Context of the Research Study 20

1.4 Keywords **23**

1.4.1 Quality 24

1.4.2 Mentor 25

1.4.3 'Disadvantaged' 28

1.4.4 Note on Word Choice 30

1.5 What This Thesis is About **31**

1.6 Structure of the Thesis **32**

Chapter 2: Golden Threads and Silver Bullets *33*

2.1 Introduction **33**

2.2 A Golden Thread **33**

2.2.1 All That Glitters 36

2.2.2 The Gilded Cage of Initial Teacher Training and Education 38

2.3 A Silver Bullet **41**

2.3.1 The CCF and the EEF 42

2.3.2 "One solitary generic statement" 45

2.4 Gold, Silver and "Difficult Choices" **49**

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework *52*

3.1 Introduction **52**

3.2 Games and Education **54**

3.3 Theoretical Underpinnings **57**

3.3.1 Neoliberalism 59

3.3.2 Games of Truth 60

3.3.3 Power 61

3.3.4 Subjectivity 64

3.3.5 Governmentality 65

3.4 Conclusion **69**

Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods *72*
4.1 Introduction 72
4.2 Research Questions 73
4.2.1 Research Question 1 74
4.2.2 Research Question 2 76
4.2.3 Research Question 3 77
4.3 Data Collection 80
4.3.1 Primary Data 80
4.3.2 Secondary Data 84
4.4 Data Analysis 86
4.4.1 History of the Present 86
4.4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis 87
4.4.3 Narrative Analysis 88
4.4.4 Metaphor Analysis 89
4.4.5 Summary 90
4.5 Conclusion 91
Chapter 5: Ethical Considerations *92*
5.1 Introduction 92
5.2 Principles for Research 93
5.3 Recruitment and Participation 94
5.3.1 Access 95
5.3.2 Consent 95
5.3.3 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion 96
5.3.4 Anonymity and Pseudonymity 97
5.4 Risks and Benefits 99
5.5 Data Storage 100
5.6 Positionality 101
5.6.1 Navigating Positionality 101
5.6.2 My Positionality 104
5.7 Conclusion 108
Chapter 6: The Descent of Quality *111*
6.1 Introduction 111
6.2 The Monitorial System of Education 113
6.3 Preventing Society's Ills 116
6.4 Reform, The State and The Market 121
Chapter 7: Taking Chances *126*
7.1 Introduction 126
7.2 "A truly world-class system of initial teacher preparation" 128
7.3 "The training and expertise of mentors and lead mentors" 131
7.4 "This important element of training must not be left to chance" 133
7.5 Conclusion 137

Chapter 8: Sinking, Swimming and Surviving in ITTE *139*
8.1 Introduction 139
8.2 Making and Breaking 140
8.2.1 "What can I do to make it so I'm not out of my depth?" (Sophie's Story) 143
8.2.2 'Jumping through hoops' and 'Sinking and Swimming' 147
8.3 Luck of the Draw 152
8.3.1 "I didn't allow myself to feel like that while I was there" (Zahra's Story) 153
8.4 Conclusion 158
Chapter 9: Playing the Ofsted Game *160*
9.1 Introduction 160
9.2 Recognition of the Game 160
9.2.1 Student-Teacher Responses 161
9.2.2 Teacher-Educator Responses 168
9.3 A Spoonful of Sugar 172
9.4 The Gaze of Ofsted 176
9.5 Conclusion 178
Chapter 10: Levelling the Playing Field *181*
10.1 Introduction 181
10.2 Conceptualisations of Equality 182
10.3 Equality, Quality and Competition 187
10.4 Placements and Playing Fields (Selma's Story) 190
10.5 Conclusion 193
Chapter 11: Discussion *197*
11.1 Introduction 197
11.1.1 Chapter Summary 197
11.1.2 What Has This Thesis Demonstrated? 199
11.2 Discussion of Research Questions 200
11.2.1 Research Question 1 200
11.2.2 Research Question 2 202
11.2.3 Research Question 3 204
11.3 Reflections 206
11.3.1 Aims and Findings 206
11.3.2 Research Methodology and Design 208
11.3.3 Implications for Further Research 211
Chapter 12: Conclusion *213*
References *217*
Appendices *234*
Appendix A: Online Questionnaire Responses 234
Appendix B: Contexts, Questions and Prompts for Research Interviews 240
Appendix C: Ethical Approval Letter 243

List of Figures

Figure 1. Primary school disadvantage gap, 2011 to 2024. Source: Education Policy Institute (2025) 11
Figure 2. Secondary school disadvantage gap, 2011 to 2024. Source: Education Policy Institute (2025) 11
Figure 3. Education catch-up spending across four nations of the UK as compared with the UK and Netherlands. Source: Sibieta (2021) 12
Figure 4. Word cloud of ITT Market Review Report (2021). 18
Figure 5. Photograph depicting traditional games and interview questions. 82
Figure 6. Photograph depicting a 'Snakes and Ladders' board game and interview questions. 82

List of Tables

Table 1. Instances of specific word use in selected English ITTE reform policy documents from 2015-2024 17
Table 2. List of pseudonyms used for student-teacher (ST) and teacher-educator (TE) interviewees. 98

Table A1. Likert scale statement responses from online questionnaires distributed to student-teachers. 235
Table A2. Comments from online questionnaires distributed to student-teachers. 237
Table B1. Table indicating contexts for interviews conducted for the research study. 240

Abstract

Education reform is increasingly legitimised via discourses centred on quality. Quality of teaching is posed as a policy problem, largely in response to global rankings in International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Reforms to Initial Teacher Training and Education (ITTE) in England have centred around a dominant and pervasive idea in recent years: that quality of teaching is the most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for pupils, particularly for children classed as disadvantaged. One proposed central mechanism for developing quality teaching today is in developing "high-quality mentoring" (DfE, 2021b: 9) across ITTE providers and schools in order to improve the education and training of student-teachers.

This research study uses a set of approaches to researching reforms in ITTE, including discourse analysis of policy documents and semi-structured interviews with student-teachers and teacher-educators from one university in Birmingham, England. This involved drawing out the metaphorical language of games which can be used to describe, for example, inspection of education quality ('We have to play the game') as well as concepts of equalising disadvantages and supporting social mobility ('Level the playing field'). Metaphors are rhetorical and persuasive and they can constitute and reinforce professional identities and cultures, therefore their place in ITTE discourses and practices requires investigation.

Findings indicate a range of metaphorical justifications for discourses, policies and practices in ITTE today. Today, metaphors in ITTE can rhetorically and euphemistically promote neoliberal values of competitive inequality, as well as the effects of this type of political rationality. Effects include demands of performativity ('Jumping through hoops'), narratives of survival ('Sinking or swimming'), and mindsets of cynical compliance ('Playing the Ofsted game'). Closer attention to the study of metaphors in ITTE can reveal that which can often be concealed in policy justifications and professional discourses.

Keywords: quality, mentoring, disadvantage, initial teacher training and education (ITTE)

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Thank you all so very much.

Abbreviations

BERA	British Educational Research Association
CCF	*ITT Core Content Framework*
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
DfE	Department for Education
DWTD	*Delivering World-Class Teacher Development*
ECF	*Early Career Framework*
ECT	Early career teacher
EDI	Equality, diversity and inclusion
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
ILSA	International Large-Scale Assessment
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
ITT	Initial Teacher Training
ITTE	Initial Teacher Training and Education
ITTECF	*Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework*
ITTMRR	*Initial Teacher Training Market Review Report*
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Ofsted	The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status
SATs	Standard Assessment Tests
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
TR&RS	*Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy*
UKCORI	UK Committee on Research Integrity
UN	United Nations
UT	University Tutor

Chapter 1: The Quality Problem

1.1 Introduction

> The data is very clear that this disruption to children's learning – it has been a huge shock to their learning and education – has hit children who face disadvantage more than others. We have to be mindful of that, which is why I was so pleased that last week, for example, the covid premium resource to schools was allocated on the basis of the pupil premium, so it is weighted to where there is the greatest need. I do not think you can do anything in education in this country without being mindful of the disadvantage gap. That is something that we will have to attend to as we think about the programme of work that I am recommending (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 2).

These words were spoken by Sir Kevan Collins in a House of Commons Education Committee session entitled *The Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services*. The session took place on 2nd March 2021 with Collins as a witness alongside Professor Becky Francis, Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation, and Geoff Barton, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders.

The meeting took place nearly a year after schools in England closed to the majority of children in order to reduce the growing spread of coronavirus during the COVID-19 pandemic. To begin with, school buildings had remained open only for "children of key workers and vulnerable children" (Department for Education and Williamson, 2020) while some education provision was made available via online lessons with schools becoming not only physical but "virtual institutions" (Breslin, 2021: 1).

At the time of the meeting, Collins was the newly-appointed Education Recovery Commissioner tasked with overseeing "a comprehensive programme of catch-up" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 2) and the question he was responding to came from the Chair of the committee, Robert Halfon: "Will you be looking solely at clawing back the learning lost because of the pandemic, or will you be more ambitious and seek to address the 18.4- month attainment gap at GCSE level that existed prior to covid-19" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 2).

Halfon's question was one of ambition, asking whether Collins wished to revert to a pre-pandemic status quo where large disparities in the attainment between pupils from the poorest

backgrounds and their peers exist as the norm, or whether he imagined the possibility of a more equal and fair education system where this 'attainment gap' was lessened, or perhaps even eradicated.

As I write today five years on from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it appears that neither option has been taken. In fact, in terms of months of learning – the measure for disadvantage that Halfon uses in his question - the gap currently sits at 19.1 months between disadvantaged pupils and their peers at GCSE level (Education Policy Institute, 2025). In terms of primary school education, the attainment gap is at 10 months at the end of key stage 2. Prior to the pandemic, this gap was 9.3 months in 2019, and at its lowest point at 9.2 months in 2018 (Education Policy Institute, 2025).

As the following graphs show, the attainment gap measured at the end of primary school (see Figure 1) increased following the pandemic, erasing years of progress towards closing the gap. Assessment data is not available for the years 2020 and 2021 as key stage 2 national curriculum tests were cancelled in those years, but examination results from 2022 show a sharp increase after a decade of a mostly declining attainment gap. In secondary schools (see Figure 2), Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) and Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs) stood in for secondary school assessments (GCSEs). Yet again, a clear rise between 2019 and 2022 is evident. Despite a slight narrowing of the attainment gap in the past year, in both primary and secondary schools the gap is still close to 2012 levels, effectively erasing over a decade of progress in closing the gap.

The disadvantage gap at the end of primary school since 2011

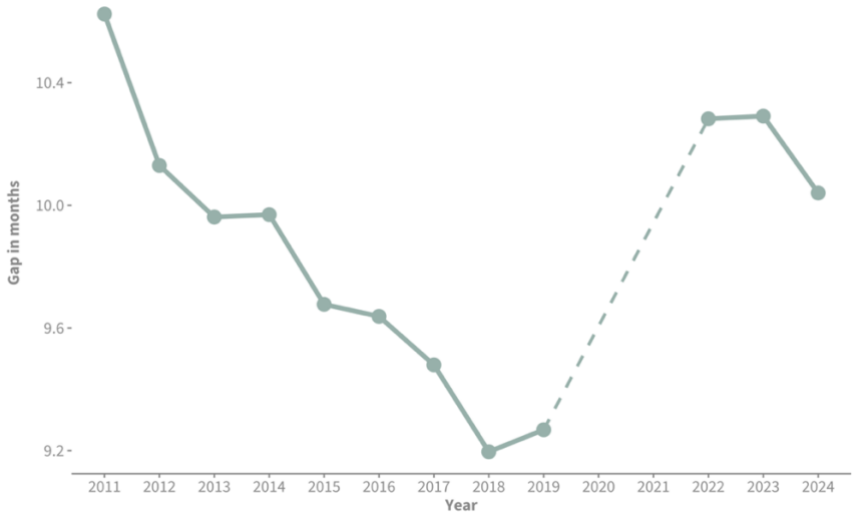

Figure 1. Primary school disadvantage gap, 2011 to 2024. Source: Education Policy Institute (2025)

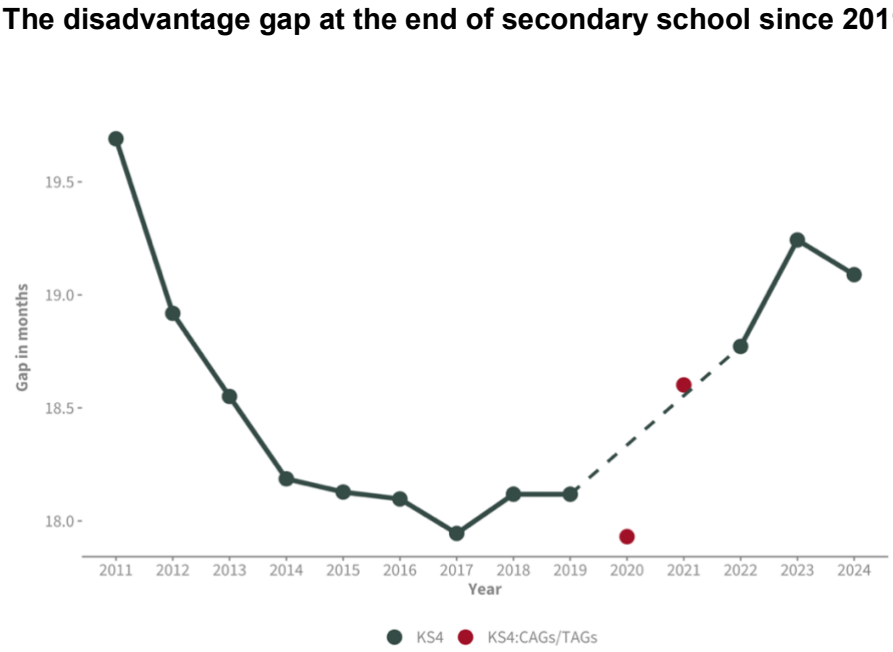

Figure 2. Secondary school disadvantage gap, 2011 to 2024. Source: Education Policy Institute (2025)

In addition to the incremental progress towards closing the attainment gap since 2011 now seemingly lost, the Department for Education (DfE) suggests that it may take another decade to return the gap to pre-pandemic levels (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2023). Halfon's far less ambitious option of "clawing back", as he suggested to Collins, is now at best a slow crawl back to a starting point that was already far too wide to begin with.

We may never know the impact of Sir Kevan Collins' recommended "programme of work" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 2). Press reports indicate that his "fully evidenced, fully costed" (Severs, 2024) plan included extra funding for professional development for teachers including early career teachers (ECTs), funding for schools to spend using guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), and funding to expand the National Tutoring Programme (NTP). Collins compared and "sense-checked" (Severs, 2024) proposed spending with other countries such as the US and Netherlands. His final proposal to government was costed at £12.5 billion.

In the end, £1.4 billion was offered. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak, and Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson presented their final offer to Collins and explained that the majority of £1 billion would be spent on tutoring while the

remaining £400 million would be spent on several training initiatives. Collins stepped down from his role as Education Recovery Commissioner shortly afterwards.

Combined with funding of a "catch-up premium" (DfE, 2021a) for the academic year 2020 to 2021, and a "recovery premium" (DfE, 2023) to cover the following years until 2024, total recovery funding equated to just over £3 billion (Sibieta, 2021). Comparative per-pupil funding is shown in Figure 3. Much like other countries in the UK, the stark reality of actual funding in England can be seen when compared to the examples of the US and Netherlands.

Per-pupil education recovery spending within and outside of the UK

Figure 3. Education catch-up spending across four nations of the UK as compared with the UK and Netherlands. Source: Sibieta (2021)

Collins' own words, three years apart from those given in the House of Commons Education Committee meeting, demonstrate the squandered ambition on display and highlight the extent to which children have been dispossessed of higher funding and of brighter futures:

> All these things we could have done to send a signal about childhood… But we did nothing. We gave up. It was pathetic (Collins, reported in Severs, 2024).

This section has described a series of events following the COVID-19 pandemic. From ambitious questions of "clawing back" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 2) lost learning, to the "pathetic" (Collins, reported in Severs, 2024) economic and political response, it illustrates and exemplifies a sustained depreciation and decline in education

funding and ambition in recent years. Suffice to say that far more than 'lost learning' is at stake, but rather lost funding, lost ambition and even lost futures for children in England's education system today.

In the following section, focus turns to a dominant and pervasive idea which underlies these squandered ambitions. It is the idea of 'quality', which sits at the heart of policies and practices regarding children classed as disadvantaged and overshadows the wider education system today.

1.2 "There is nothing else to do but focus on quality"

During that same House of Commons Education Committee meeting that Sir Kevan Collins attended in his short-lived position as Education Recovery Commissioner, Professor Becky Francis clarified her own idea for a strategy moving forward. Here is a key example of her suggested approach:

> I want to reiterate the point that, in a way, the temptation is to be looking for catchy new initiatives and so forth, but actually it is about the tried and tested. The evidence is very clear that high-quality teaching will make the biggest difference, and we know that is particularly important for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 11).

It is important to note that Francis chooses to "reiterate" the point. She had already recommended earlier "a focus on teacher quality as the key driver here and the most important thing that is going to make a difference to learning gain overall, but particularly for disadvantaged students" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 5).

This point, or some slight variation or another on its wording, has been stated in various research outputs in England in recent years. It is frequently mentioned in reports from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2018: 2, 9-11; EEF, 2022: 5; Francis et al., 2021: 4), of which Francis is chief executive. It can also be found – mostly unquestioned – in blog posts and websites of influential educational organisations (Chartered College of Teaching, 2023; NFER, n.d.). There are different variations in terms of wording, but typically the point is expressed in the following way: Quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor for improving student outcomes, and particularly for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

As will be explored further in the next chapter, it is also a point reiterated in education policy (HM Government, 2022: 8) including teacher education policy (DfE, 2019a: 3; DfE, 2022a: 4;

DfE, 2024b: 3). Furthermore, it is something that new trainee teachers are required to 'know', with the requirement for new teachers to "Learn that… High quality teaching has a long-term positive effect on pupils' life chances, particularly for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds" (DfE, 2024a: 11. See also DfE, 2019a: 9; DfE, 2019b: 8).

Not only is this premise a persistent one in policy and in wider education discourses, throughout the House of Commons Education Committee meeting there appears to be a shared consensus that quality teaching can particularly benefit disadvantaged students and support education recovery following the pandemic, with fellow witnesses Geoff Barton and Sir Kevan Collins in agreement. Collins, for example, states that "our most important resource" is "the quality of teaching – not teachers, but teaching" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 28).

In addition, Collins shows his support for the idea that half of schools' pupil premium funding should be spent on improving quality of teaching, an idea proposed and promoted by the EEF known as the "tiered model" (EEF, 2022). Collins describes this guidance offered from the EEF and jointly promoted by the DfE as "one of the best things that has been happening over the last few years in the DfE" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 24).

Quality of teaching is understandably an important aim in education and both Collins and Francis deem it to be a funding priority. Collins and Francis have both led the EEF and their ideas display some of the ways in which ideas around educational disadvantage and addressing the attainment gap have emerged and evolved in recent years. The most prominent of these are the ideas that 'disadvantaged' children should receive additional funding (a pupil premium) given to schools to better support them, and that schools should spend approximately half of this money (in accordance with the tiered model) on improving teacher quality.

A discourse of quality has become prevalent in education in recent years (Ball, 2016) and 'quality' has become an increasingly dominant keyword in teacher education (Brooks, 2023). In terms of initial teacher training and education (ITTE) today, quality of teaching can often be presented as the only idea worth discussion in relation to addressing educational disadvantages (Major and Briant, 2023). This is exemplified by Francis when she states that, "there is nothing else to do but focus on quality. We cannot dilute quality for disadvantaged pupils; those who need it most" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 34).

However, despite the apparent consensus amongst influential figures such as Francis, Collins, and Barton, a 'dilution' was nonetheless the result considering the significant lack of funding offered towards education recovery (£1.4 billion rather than Collins' proposed £12.5 billion) alongside an ongoing attrition of per-pupil funding in schools for over a decade (Sibieta, 2024). We may now ask: Is it possible to work effectively towards developing quality teaching in order to better support disadvantaged pupils, even when there is a lack of political and economic impetus to do so? In other words, is it possible to achieve high-quality teaching without high-quality funding?

Further questions also emerge: How has such a situation come to be, in which leadership of a post-pandemic response to education recovery relies on quality teaching as the only solution? What other effects may occur with such a dominant logic that "there is nothing else to do but focus on quality" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 34) in terms of teacher education? How has this idea become rationalised and operationalised in existing reforms, and how has it been interpreted, negotiated and what practices can it legitimise? Furthermore, how might we attempt to evaluate such dominant ideas around the importance of quality education for 'disadvantaged' children today?

These questions guide the following sections as attention turns to how ideas around quality, disadvantage and the role of mentoring have manifested in DfE policies in recent years, specifically regarding initial teacher training and education (ITTE).

1.3 Quality Teaching and Quality Mentoring in ITTE

> The quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for pupils – and it is particularly important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. No one is born a great teacher. Great teachers continuously improve over time, benefitting from the mentoring of expert colleagues and a structured introduction to the core body of knowledge, skills and behaviours that define great teaching (DfE, 2019a: 3).

This is the introductory paragraph of the *ITT Core Content Framework* (CCF), a significant policy document, which was effective in England between 2020 and 2025, describing the minimum course expectations that initial teacher training and education (ITTE) institutions were required to provide during that period. The paragraph is significant as it proposes a structured introduction to a core body of knowledge, skills and behaviours and associates quality of teaching with mentoring as a key mechanism to facilitate this introduction.

The CCF was published in 2019 alongside the *Early Career Framework* (ECF), which detailed early career teachers' (ECTs) entitlement to an additional year of professional development as part of their induction, and the *Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy* (TR&RS), which outlined how key priorities could help to attract and keep more teachers in the profession. Both policy texts additionally promote mentoring in ITTE. For example, the ECF (DfE, 2019b) calls for additional years of mentoring for early career teachers, and the TR&S (DfE, 2019c) presents mentoring support as a key mechanism for retaining teachers in the profession for longer.

Following a review (DfE, 2024b), an *Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework* (ITTECF) which "combines and replaces" (DfE, 2024a: 4) the CCF and ECF has since come into effect from September 2025. The ITTECF includes "updates and enhancements" (DfE, 2024a: 4) such as support for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), oracy, early cognitive development, and social and emotional learning. Yet its stance on quality teaching as a proposed solution for educational disadvantage is unchanged from that of the CCF. In fact, the first sentence of the review document is a word-for-word copy of the first sentence of the CCF: "the quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for pupils – and it is particularly important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds" (DfE, 2024b: 3).

1.3.1 Mentoring in ITTE Policy

Both the ITTECF and CCF are described as "independently assessed and endorsed by the Education Endowment Foundation" (DfE, 2019a: 2; 2024a: 2) and chief executive Professor Becky Francis is listed as one of eight members of the Expert Advisory Group which the CCF was "developed in consultation with" (DfE, 2019a: 2). It is perhaps easy to see how the highly prevalent idea that "quality of teaching" can help in supporting "pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds" (DfE, 2019a: 3) has gained a prominent place in texts such as the CCF and review of the ITTECF (DfE, 2024b). Though the emergence and justification for mentoring is perhaps less clear and requires some further discussion here.

It is apparent from the three initial policy reform documents from 2019 (DfE, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c) that mentoring has been represented in policy as a key mechanism for change in ITTE over recent years, with the suggestion that improving mentoring can improve quality of teaching, and relatedly support a crisis of teacher workforce attrition, while also facilitating closing of attainment gaps between children classed as 'disadvantaged' and their peers. In

other words, policy reform literature suggest that quality mentoring can facilitate quality teaching, leading to supposed impacts of reduced attainment gaps and improved teacher retention.

However, the significance of mentoring in ITTE is not limited to the CCF, ECF and TR&RS. In 2021, after the COVID-19 pandemic had caused major disruptions to schools, universities and other ITTE providers, the *Initial Teacher Training Market Review Report* (ITTMRR) was published, calling for "high-quality mentoring" (DfE, 2021b: 9) in a policy document further promoting "significant reform" (DfE, 2021b: 4) to ITTE provision. In fact, the ITTMRR makes frequent reference to the words 'quality' and 'mentor' throughout the text. Table 1 displays the frequency of these words used within ITTE policies from 2015 to 2024. Words counted include variations based on tense or plurality, such as 'mentoring' and 'mentors', but excludes words that may contain these search terms within them, such as 'equality' and 'inequality.'

Table 1. Instances of specific word use in selected English ITTE reform policy documents from 2015-2024

Publication	**Date**	**Quality**	**Mentor**
1 *Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training*	2015	52	101
2 *A Framework of Core Content for ITT*	2016	16	5
3 *Developing Behaviour Management Content for ITT*	2016	2	28
4 *ITT Core Content Framework*	2019	17	23
5 *Early Career Framework*	2019	32	3
6 *Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy*	2019	24	7
7 *ITT Market Review Report*	2021	161	143
8 *ITT Provider Guidance on Stage 2*	2022	57	144
9 *Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework*	2024	17	6
10 *Outcomes of the Review of the ITT CCF and ECF*	2024	8	31

Table 1 demonstrates that 'quality' and 'mentor' appear in every significant ITTE policy since 2015, though word frequency is notably higher in some documents than others. The first text listed, the *Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training* (2015) includes many uses of the terms 'quality' and 'mentor' with the review suggesting the formation of "national standards for mentors" (Carter, 2015: 12) as one solution towards improving the quality of teaching, posed as a key policy problem throughout the review (Mutton et al., 2017).

Quality and mentoring continue to have relevance in subsequent policy documents, but word use reaches its zenith in 2021 with a substantially high frequency of the terms ‘quality’ and ‘mentor’ evident within the ITTMRR. In fact, the report itself consists of only fifty-six pages, so the proportionate frequencies of word usage in the ITTMRR – 161 counts of ‘quality’ and 143 counts of ‘mentor’ – are significantly high. A year later, in the *Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Provider Guidance on Stage 2* (DfE, 2022c), the word ‘mentor’ then reaches its highest point with 144 mentions. Such a “significant recurrence of terms” (Gillies, 2008: 687) in education policy texts can suggest trends and trajectories in educational discourses and provide a rationale for further textual analysis.

Given the substantially high frequency of both the words ‘quality’ and ‘mentor’ in the ITTMRR, the text invites closer attention. To further contextualise word use, and to compare these words with others used in the ITTMRR, the following word cloud of the document is presented (Figure 4). Word clouds use metadata to visually present frequently used words in qualitative texts with higher frequencies indicated by larger text sizes. In this case, a portable document format (PDF) version of the ITTMRR was processed using an online word cloud generator.

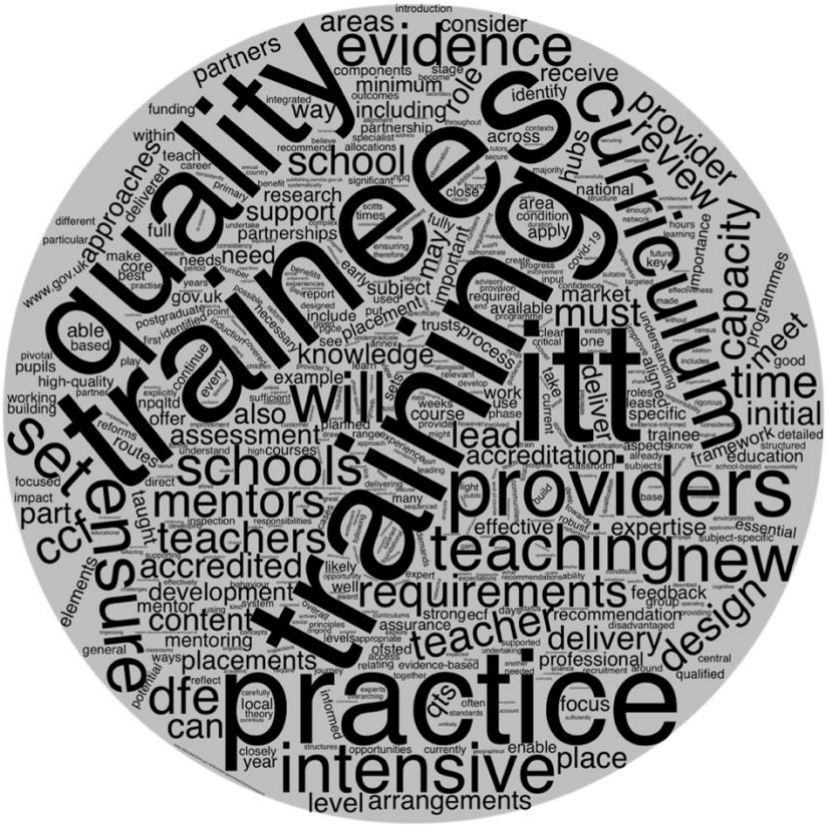

Figure 4. Word cloud of *ITT Market Review Report* (2021).

Word cloud generation can allow for additional "preliminary analysis, quickly highlighting main differences and possible points of interest, thus providing a direction for detailed analyses" (McNaught and Lam, 2010: 631) in qualitative research. Therefore, both the table displaying word frequencies (Table 1) and the word cloud (Figure 4) can serve to investigate and problematise significant ideas and trends further within and between policy texts. For example, while Table 1 demonstrates a clear trend towards high frequencies of words 'quality' and 'mentor' emerging, particularly around 2021 and 2022, the word cloud can present these words in relation to other commonly used words. In the ITTMRR, largely visible words such as 'trainees', 'training' and 'ITT' may be expected, yet other frequently used words like 'curriculum', 'evidence', 'practice' and 'intensive' can additionally indicate more recent trends in ITTE discourses, policies and practices that can be considered further in their relationship to the terms 'quality' and 'mentor.'

The words 'mentor', 'mentors' and 'mentoring' all feature on the word cloud (Figure 4), though their sizes perhaps do not reflect their high count as indicated on the word frequency table due to these three forms of the word in use. The word 'quality' is prominent and is clearly one of the largest words, therefore one of the most frequently used in the ITTMRR text. There is clearly a rationale for further analysis of this ITTE policy document as well as to other related policies which promote mentoring while leaning into discourses centred around quality.

Closer inspection of the word cloud gives an indication of the power that a text such as the ITTMRR has – or intends to have – over providers and practitioners. Either side of the word 'training' which cuts diagonally through the centre are the words 'will' and 'must.' These prominent modal verbs carry connotations of certainty and obligation. This may suggest that such values underpin elements of the ITTMRR and perhaps even conversely imply that possibility, choice or autonomy are less valued in ITTE practices today.

1.3.2 Quality, Mentoring and Disadvantage

Discussion of prominence and visibility of words is helpful in initially exploring the ITTMRR and providing justification for further study of key terms and texts. But we may also question the lack of visibility of some words too. It is true that the CCF is clear in its first sentence that quality of teaching can support children classed as 'disadvantaged.' Reference is also made to the words 'disadvantage' or 'disadvantaged' in the ITTMRR eleven times. While educational disadvantage is a consideration here, this is significantly low in comparison to the high word frequencies of words like 'quality' and 'mentor.' Visibility of the word 'quality' and lack of visibility

of the words ‘disadvantage’ or ‘disadvantaged’ may lead to further questioning, for example: What is quality for and who is it intended to serve?

Gillies (2008) and McNaught and Lam (2010) qualify their approaches to word frequency and word cloud analysis as indicative of trends and developments, though they stress the limits of these potentially superficial methods. These approaches as used here then highlight the significance of specific keywords in education policy discourses and provide the rationale for further analysis. Not only are these words ‘quality’ and ‘mentor’ prominent and used frequently, their significance as keywords in the opening paragraph of key texts such as the CCF (DfE, 2019a) and review of the ITTECF (DfE, 2024b) adds to their importance. These terms require further consideration along with the sometimes visible yet sometimes hidden proposed purpose of quality mentoring and quality teaching, namely improving educational opportunities for children classed as ‘disadvantaged.’

In this section I have demonstrated the significance of a discourse around ‘quality’ in the opening paragraph of the CCF as well as in other related ITTE policies such as the ITTMRR (DfE, 2021b) and subsequent guidance (DfE, 2022c) which continues to provide justification for ITTE reform in policy texts today (DfE, 2024b). There is a clear rationale to further explore the significance of these ideas and the policy claims that quality mentoring can support teacher retention and promote quality teaching, which in turn can better support children classed as ‘disadvantaged’.

1.3.3 Context of the Research Study

While the CCF is no longer in force in ITTE in England today, the ITTECF (DfE, 2024a) carries forward many of the same ideas as its predecessor, particularly regarding quality and the education of ‘disadvantaged’ children. Table 1 (see section 1.3.1) indicates an increased emphasis on mentoring between 2021 and 2022 with the introduction and implementation of market review reforms in ITTE, but there is some comparative decline in terms of word count afterwards. While this may reflect the recognition given towards the high workload pressures experienced by mentors (DfE, 2024b), policy also clarifies that mentors are considered to play a “vital role” (DfE, 2024b, 6) and placed “at the centre” (DfE, 2024b: 7) of ITTE reforms. Therefore, the continued emphasis on mentoring in ITTE today must still be considered.

It must be said, however, that this research study and specifically its data collection period took place prior to the implementation of the ITTECF. The research context is therefore predominantly situated during a time of significant change in ITTE in which an intense

emphasis on the terms ‘quality’ and ‘mentoring’ was evident in policy as indicated by the high word frequencies of the ITTMRR (DfE, 2021b) and subsequent guidance (DfE, 2022c). The period is characterised as unique to England, yet significantly relevant to international researchers for its introduction of mandatory content, accreditation processes, heightened cultures of compliance, and the potential implications for shortfalls in teacher supply that may result from its implementation (Ellis and Childs, 2024).

It may be apparent that there are problems regarding quality in ITTE today, however it is necessary to make explicit what is meant by ‘problem’ in this case. Quality in teacher education is framed as a “policy problem” (Cochran-Smith, 2005: 4) signalled by the publication of the *Carter Review* (2015) in England (Mutton et al., 2017). The ‘problem’ has been regarded as one of quality, whereby the solution to issues around teacher retention, widening attainment gaps, and the demand to improve national education performance in a geopolitical context all come back to teacher quality (Mutton et al., 2017). The *Carter Review* (2015) proposes solutions including a stronger emphasis on school-based experience, an underpinning knowledge base of ‘core content’, and the establishment of standards for school-based mentors. Such ideas continue to dominate ITTE today.

These ‘solutions’ essentially define a narrow concept of what quality might look like in ITTE. Quality is defined by a linear input to output logic, lacking contextual or local dimensions, and often promoting school-based routes to teaching over others. This is to say that there are underlying problems around ‘quality’ education and ‘quality’ teaching which lie in how they are conceptualised and how these dominant conceptualisations are decided and promoted. Quality may be seemingly defined in policy, yet its meaning and effects are often negotiated in practices, and different stakeholders will undoubtedly bring different ideas of what ‘quality’ might mean to them to different contexts and practices.

For this research study, one specific quality problem addressed lies in how the term ‘quality’ is presented to student-teachers and teacher-educators. Building upon the CCF and today enacted as part of the ITTECF, student-teachers are expected to know that “High quality teaching has a long-term positive effect on pupils’ life chances, particularly for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds” (DfE, 2024a: 11). This ‘Learn that…’ statement is provided in the first section of the ITTECF in alignment with the Teachers’ Standards and entitled “High Expectations” (DfE, 2024a: 11).

Today in ITTE and education more broadly, it may be so that “there is nothing else to do but focus on quality” (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 34). Yet telling student-

teachers and teacher-educators so via a framework of core content and through the repetition of high frequency words and phrases in policy documentation may be unlikely to have the effect of closing attainment gaps as is suggested. While high expectations are an important consideration in education practices, this 'Learn that…' statement may instead serve to communicate an idea that responsibility for such gaps lies with teachers – and the 'quality' of their teaching. It is a potentially dangerous idea that can affect the mind, the body and the soul (Ball, 2003) of new teachers and may even run counter to any aims towards improved teacher retention as the "daunting" (Cochran-Smith, 2005: 3) expectations of teaching confront the harsh reality of education today.

The quality problem as considered throughout this thesis is therefore largely a question of rhetoric and the extent to which student-teachers, teacher-educators and other stakeholders in ITTE are persuaded, acculturated and inculcated with the powerful message that quality of teaching can best support children classed as 'disadvantaged' and relatedly, that mentoring can support the development of 'quality teaching.' It questions not only how quality is defined and legitimised, but what effects its persistent communication, repetition and reiteration can do to practitioners and practices. In other words, it is a consideration of the effects of rhetoric in ITTE policy and practices.

Three research questions guide this study, which are articulated and justified more fully in chapter four (see section 4.2). These questions invite further exploration of the historical and political conditions of education policy and their underpinning logics and rationalities. These questions also allow for further investigation of the rhetorical language that can be used in both policy and practice. This chapter has so far described the emergence of ideas centring around quality, mentoring and disadvantage in education with specific attention to key ITTE policy documents. The repetition of key words ('quality' and 'mentor'), related significance and justification for reform (education for 'disadvantaged' children), and reiteration of prevalent ideas (quality of teaching is the most important in-school factor for 'disadvantaged' children) have been explored and discussed. But there is more to consider in terms of the rhetoric of education policy.

As Cochran-Smith (2005) proposes, research in teacher education can identify the social structures and purposes in which education is enacted. I aim to explore the "cultural ideas, ideals, values, and beliefs" (Cochran-Smith, 2005: 3) in ITTE policy and practice "through a rhetorical lens [which] means taking account of the ways that metaphors, narratives, and literary devices" (Cochran-Smith, 2005: 3) are used to justify and legitimise educational ideas,

practices and beliefs. It is with such a rhetorical lens that I consider the logics and rationalities which sit at the heart of efforts to reform ITTE.

The numbers of children living in poverty today are rising, with now approximately 4.5 million children living in relative poverty in the UK (Stone, 2025). The education of pupils from the poorest households must remain a key concern for educators and researchers alike. While education policy appears to promote a desire to offer the best education to all children, including pupils classed as 'disadvantaged', representing the issue as only a problem of quality teaching is insufficient. Furthermore, there are psychological, professional and sociocultural implications for effectively placing a heavy burden on teachers for the deeply rooted, complex and intertwined issues of economic and educational inequality.

It is important then not only to question the dominant logic of quality and its limitations, particularly in relation to the education of children classed as 'disadvantaged', but to consider the effects of these discourses on new teachers entering the profession and on the wider professional cultures in which they become a part of.

It is time to evaluate the quality problem.

1.4 Keywords

As demonstrated in the previous section, this research study requires a focus on rhetorical language in education policy, including the repetition of key terms. Recurring words 'quality' and 'mentor' are interrelated, with mentoring having proposed impacts on teacher quality. Policy even calls for "high-quality mentoring" (DfE, 2021b: 9) in ITTE reforms demonstrating the close associations these keywords have. Claims that 'quality of teaching' can support children classed as 'disadvantaged' are prevalent and this logic is increasingly presented as the only solution for the wide-reaching and complex problem of educational inequality that the attainment gap represents. This is aptly demonstrated in Professor Becky Francis' conclusion that "there is nothing else to do but focus on quality" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 34).

The interrelationship between these three keywords is apparent, yet their definitions are not necessarily easy to clarify. This section aims to explore the complexity of each word in the context of education, and specifically to ITTE where appropriate.

1.4.1 Quality

Discourse on quality became predominant in managerial literature in the United States of America around the 1950s (Beckford, 2002: 4) and over time has spread globally through different industries as well as from the private to the public sector. It is a discourse that emphasises customer satisfaction, standardisation and quantifiable methods of evaluation (Dahlberg et al., 1999: 90) though it has not always meant the same things in different countries, industries and workplaces. Graeber (2015) describes the word 'quality' as an "empty" term along with related words like 'vision', 'excellence' and 'innovation', which have been carried over from "financial and corporate circles" (Graeber, 2015: 16) into education, science and government.

Quality has become a dominant keyword in education (Brooks, 2023) in recent years. A "discourse of quality" (Ball, 2016: 1051) has emerged since the introduction of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in the year 2000 and has become prevalent in education policies and practices. Following chapters will explore the roots of this discourse further as well as the practices it can legitimise today. Suffice to say that International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) such as PISA can produce and promote ranking systems whereby education systems appear to compete in a geopolitical arena with other education systems around the world.

Additionally, in 2015 a series of sustainable development goals (SDGs) were established by the United Nations (UN) to address interconnected environmental, social and economic issues faced by a worsening climate emergency. SDG4 is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015: 41). These goals are interrelated and multi-faceted and address widespread, complex and existential issues. SDG4, frequently shortened to 'Quality Education', has incredibly significant implications for sustainability and social justice with the UN suggesting that quality education is "a key enabler of most other SDGs" (United Nations, 2024).

Although it can be differentiated as the nature of learning in higher education, quality can be conflated and "taken as shorthand for quality assurance processes" (Harvey, 2024: 162). Nationally, Ofsted have traditionally inspected schools using four key grading descriptors, including 'quality of education' (Ofsted, 2024) and may be viewed as a dominant authoritative voice on how 'quality' is conceptualised by practitioners in schools and universities. Ofsted's approach underwent a consultation period (Ofsted, 2025), in response to issues raised following the death of Ruth Perry, a primary school headteacher who took her own life following

her school being downgraded from ‘outstanding’ to ‘inadequate’ after an Ofsted inspection. An inquest found that the inspection “had contributed to her death” (House of Commons Education Committee, 2024: 8).

The stakes can be exceedingly high when it comes to judgements of education quality, and due to associations with international rankings (ILSAs), metrics for global sustainability (SDGs) and national systems of inspection (Ofsted), it can often be a comparative or relative concept. Essentially, quality is a nebulous term but has a power of pitting countries against countries and schools against schools. The effects of this “discourse of quality” (Ball, 2016: 1051) and its underlying logic of competition requires evaluation.

An analysis of ‘quality’ claims in education research must consider not only the meanings, definitions and connotations carried by such a word, but the power that such a word can produce. “Quality is in many respects a difficult concept to argue with” (Brooks, 2023: 1) so the word may effectively carry positive connotations for practitioners and policymakers. However, when quality can mean various things to different people, too often quality can fit to the mould of a “status quo of who holds power and who is able to define quality” (Brooks, 2023: 58).

The term is at once “empty” (Graeber, 2015: 16), and at the same time seemingly something to strive for, with implications ranging from global sustainability to fairer education for children classed as ‘disadvantaged’. It may however seem superfluous to engage in research with such a strong focus on the word, given its seeming lack of definition. However, I argue that such an “empty” (Graeber, 2015: 16) yet highly used word is powerful. It is a word which demands interpretation, though it can shift and situate ideas, policies, approaches, practices and actions into potentially narrow theoretical, methodological and ethical territories. An approach to the study of discourses of quality in education is an investigation of power and the effects of powerful language, therefore it is necessary work to carry out.

As outlined previously, high-quality mentoring of student-teachers is presented as a significant policy aim in ITTE today. A consideration and interpretation of the term ‘mentor’ is therefore provided next.

1.4.2 Mentor

‘Mentor’ exists as a verb (to mentor) and a noun (a mentor), therefore it describes an action as well as a role. A mentor is someone “who gives a younger or less experienced person help

and advice over a period of time, especially at work or school" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, mentor entry). This definition demonstrates that mentoring is often time-dependent, with mentorship received over a set period as well as dependent on a specific context such as a workplace or school. Context, place and time are important factors in mentoring relationships and mentoring as a general concept carries connotations and assumptions that are culturally, socially and historically situated.

The word 'mentor' has origins in Homer's *Odyssey* in which, Odysseus, king of Ithaca, gives charge of his home to an old friend named Mentor. While Odysseus makes the long return journey following the Trojan War, Mentor comes to act as "an adviser to Telemachus, Odysseus' son; hence the use of his name to describe a trusted counsellor" (Howatson, 2013: 373). The character Mentor fits the description of a 'mentor' as understood today, with his help and advice given to the younger and less experienced Telemachus until Odysseus's return.

Despite these Ancient Greek origins, it was a French translation, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, a 1699 interpretation by François Fénelon, that expanded Mentor's role and truly helped establish the term's more modern usage. Derivations like 'mentorship' (the function), 'mentoring' (the action) and 'mentee' (the person who receives mentorship) all followed from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). The term 'mentor' established further prominence in the 1950s, with increasing popularity of formal mentoring programmes (Alayoğlu, 2012).

While the mentorship Telemachus receives from Mentor can "offer an attractive and thought-provoking model" (McIntyre et al., 1993: 11) for mentoring, often ignored in mentoring literature is the role that the goddess of wisdom, Athena, plays in Homer's *Odyssey*. Athena frequently disguises herself as Mentor to guide, support and offer protection to Telemachus. Not only does this offer an alternative to the idea of mentoring as a strictly one-to-one relationship, it also demonstrates the fantastical, ethereal or otherworldly status to mentoring which may still resonate in the popular imagination. "To separate the myths from the mystique is crucial" (Morton-Cooper and Palmer, 2000: 36), yet not necessarily an easy task given the broad scope for conceptualising mentors.

In ITTE, mentoring is a pedagogical approach. Often distinguished from 'coaching', mentoring can be seen as "more directive" (Oberholzer and Lofthouse, 2023: 22). In comparison, coaching enables practitioners to "drive their own learning journeys" (Oberholzer and Lofthouse, 2023: 23), therefore there is an implication that mentees may have less control over their learning and are situated within a hierarchy rather than in a peer-to-peer model like

coaching. Coaching is deemed to be the next step in a progression whereby the “mentor relationship evolves from dependence to independence” (Oberholzer and Lofthouse, 2023: 22) over a processual induction period.

The word ‘relationship’ is key here, and while mentors are expected to sequence learning and give structured feedback, mentoring also involves personal, professional and pedagogical bonds which include an “interplay of cognitive, affective, and interpersonal factors” (Hawkey, 1997: 332) inviting mentors and mentees to be “emotionally open” (Gardiner, 2003: 85). However, such close relationships may bring conflict. Often school-based mentors have multiple roles, including as classroom teachers or school leaders, which may allow for limited time for prioritising formal mentoring practices. Tensions can also emerge within the relationship as mentors in ITTE may also be formal observers, appraisers and performance managers of mentees, often “under the pressure of systemic demands” (Peiser et al., 2022: 198) across multiple institutions including schools and ITTE providers.

More recently, with the establishment of the ITTMRR, the role of ‘lead mentor’ has gained increased prominence in ITTE. Unlike the word ‘mentor’ which has cultural significance beyond ITTE, the idea of a ‘lead mentor’ appears to be exclusive to the context of ITTE. The role of a lead mentor is recent and invites further questioning with the ITTMRR stating that lead mentors have “a key role in supporting curriculum delivery and wider mentor oversight” (DfE, 2021b: 11). Such a hierarchical configuration, whereby a mentee is overseen by a mentor who is overseen by a lead mentor, suggests potential conceptual tensions, which furthers the idea that lead mentors are perhaps not truly mentors in the pedagogical sense, but rather more closely associated with that which Ball terms “the manager, the new hero of educational reform” (Ball, 2003: 219).

In summary, mentoring in ITTE describes a pedagogical relationship, usually between one mentor and a mentee. A mentor is typically a class-based teacher who advises a mentee, typically a student-teacher training to achieve QTS, into their classroom and guiding and facilitating the learning of that student-teacher on a school placement. Therefore, a mentoring relationship takes place over a set period and one student-teacher will most likely have multiple formal mentors during their training period.

The cultural and social significances and “diverse meanings” (McIntyre et al., 1993: 15) of mentoring may well influence these relationships, as may historical and economic factors which may blur the lines between mentor and manager. As with ‘quality’, the keyword ‘mentor’ is open to broad interpretation and given its pedagogical and managerial conceptualisations

it sits at the heart of a significant power dynamic between a less experienced student-teacher and an established class-based mentor, within a wider context of lead mentor oversight, school cultures, and the requirements of ITTE providers.

1.4.3 'Disadvantaged'

Children classed as 'disadvantaged' by the DfE are those who qualify as eligible for pupil premium funding in state-funded schools in England. Funding criteria includes eligibility for free school meals (or recorded eligibility in the past six years) and extends to looked after children, or those previously looked after by local authority or other state care. Pupils who meet free school meals eligibility attract £1,480 while (previously or currently) looked after children attract £2,570 (DfE, 2025a). Funding is allocated to schools, and it is therefore for schools to determine how this allocation should be spent. However, this apparent freedom to choose has a controversial past and has arguably become more restricted and prescriptive in recent years.

When the pupil premium was introduced in 2011 (Ofsted, 2012), schools had substantial freedom to choose how to spend pupil premium funds. At a time in which the UK government began making cuts to school budgets (Farquharson and Sibieta, 2019) as part of a wider deficit reduction programme (HM Treasury, 2010), this funding became a necessary means for schools "to maintain provision that already existed" (Ofsted, 2012: 9). In other words, pupil premium funding was essential to cover the cracks of the government's austerity cuts to education which came into force around the same time as the pupil premium programme.

It was also at this time that the EEF was established with a mission to "break the link" (EEF, n.d.) between family income and educational achievement. Today, schools are expected to spend pupil premium funding by selecting from a "menu of approaches" (DfE, 2025b: 6) that align with practices approved by the EEF. This menu must adhere to the EEF's "tiered approach" which situates "high-quality teaching" as the top tier, with "mentoring and coaching for teachers" (DfE, 2025b: 6) as one such approach to choose from within this tier. This means that schools can spend funding allocated for children classed as 'disadvantaged' on improving quality of teaching and mentoring practices.

Throughout this thesis, the term 'disadvantaged' mostly appears under erasure. This is to make clear the specific use of this DfE conceptualisation of educational inequality centred around children who may be less likely to achieve high grades in assessments due to low-household income or social factors such as being or having been a looked after child. This is

a proxy measure mostly based on the “means-tested benefit” (Jerrim, 2021: 5) of free school meals eligibility which relies on parents claiming for free school meals in the first place. Yet it is nonetheless the most widely used metric today which indicates general differences in attainment between the poorest children in society and their peers. It is not to state that children who fit this category are objectively disadvantaged, nor is it necessarily something that young people want to be classed as (Major and Briant, 2023).

In fact, Major and Briant (2023) avoid use of the “loaded term” ‘disadvantaged’ altogether as it “immediately focuses on pupils as individuals rather than the circumstances they face” (Major and Briant, 2023: 11). While I agree, terms such as ‘under-served’ or ‘under-resourced’ face similar problems and are additionally disconnected from policy wording. ‘Disadvantaged’ children are not a new phenomenon (historically terms like ‘deprived’ or ‘poor’ have been more widely used) nor are policies and practices designed to support them. However, it is the word currently used in England and therefore a significant key word to remain focused upon throughout this research study. As a result, the word remains mostly in the past participle form (‘disadvantaged’ rather than ‘disadvantage’) where appropriate. Again, this keeps to the commonly and more frequently used language of the DfE.

As with other keywords, issues of interpretation and of power dynamics are inherent here. Children classed as ‘disadvantaged’ are statistically less likely to succeed in comparison to their peers. This not only simplifies and creates a potentially arbitrary distinction between advantage and disadvantage, masking the subtleties of educational inequality, it also forces the problem into a deficit ideology, whereby children classed as ‘disadvantaged’ are seen as ‘problems’ to be ‘fixed’ rather than actors within a system that is essentially designed with embedded societal values of inequality baked in and “orientated strongly towards middle-class norms” (Major and Briant, 2023: 28).

Finally, the concept of ‘disadvantage’ can often legitimise or assuage educational reform. For example, the pupil premium was introduced at the same time harsh cuts to school budgets came into effect, to some extent softening the blow for schools but minimising any genuine impact that could be made on better serving ‘disadvantaged’ children had funding not been redirected. Today, it is a term appendaged to discourses centred on quality teaching, potentially legitimising any practices deemed to qualify as supporting ‘quality’ teaching. In ITTE, it sits at the heart of a series of reforms underscored by the work of the EEF, an organisation committed to “breaking the link between family income and educational achievement” (EEF, n.d.).

While a trajectory of funding cuts to education continue and prominent voices in policy and research double down on a logic that 'quality' is "the single most important in-school factor" (DfE, 2024b: 3) and that "there is nothing else to do but focus on quality" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 34), a large-scale "radical experiment" (Ellis and Childs, 2024: 4) is evidently underway in England today in which 'disadvantaged' children are its unconsenting participants.

1.4.4 Note on Word Choice

Throughout this thesis, I use the term 'student-teacher' to refer to students studying and teaching on placements who have not yet achieved qualified teacher status (QTS). Typically, this refers to student-teachers working towards a PGCE or BA Education with QTS qualification. They are distinct from early career teachers (ECTs) who have achieved QTS. I use 'teacher-educator' to refer to staff working for ITTE providers, including tutors, lecturers and course leaders. 'Mentors' and 'lead mentors' refer to school-based staff with those titles and responsibilities who offer mentoring support and mentoring oversight for student-teachers on school-based placements.

Additionally, throughout this thesis I use the term 'initial teacher training and education' and its acronym 'ITTE.' I understand that there are some potential tensions between the language of initial teacher training (ITT) and initial teacher education (ITE). One conceptualises the period of learning for student-teachers as 'training' while the other uses the word 'education.' DfE documents tend to use the term 'ITT' more frequently (i.e. DfE, 2019a; DfE, 2021b; DfE, 2022a; DfE, 2024a), but there are exceptions which use the term 'ITE' (DfE, 2020). The common use of ITT highlights a trend towards "policy emphasising training over education" (Tillin, 2023: 4) which can speak to a wider movement of devaluing and de-professionalising (Ball, 2016) the role of teachers and teacher-educators.

I have no desire to emphasise 'training' over 'education' by using the term initial teacher training and education (ITTE). But for the purposes of this research study, I wish to stress that a distinct, existent training occurs during a teacher's initial education period. As shall be demonstrated throughout this thesis, the 'education' of a teacher in England today involves not only the transmission of knowledge and skills that can aid the development of autonomous, critical and creative professionals. It also involves the formation of habits of mind and body, the construction of identities and attitudes, and the priming and conditioning of behaviours for student-teachers to adhere to upon entering the teaching profession.

As will be demonstrated, training can occur via acculturation and inculcation of student-teachers through a persistent transmission of ideas, discourses, narratives and metaphors. These powers may be known but can often be unknown or hidden and I argue that it is important for researchers and practitioners not to further hide these elements of training but to make them visible. Therefore, I use ITTE to maintain an emphasis on 'training' as well as 'education' throughout this thesis.

1.5 What This Thesis is About

This chapter has demonstrated the development of a dominant discourse in education today. This discourse of quality coincides with the emergence of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in the year 2000. There is a geopolitical rationale for 'quality' today as countries compete on a global scale with other countries. Quality is thus posed as a policy 'problem' with ITTE policy reforms clearly adopting the language and the logic of quality.

One highly promoted mechanism for quality teaching is the mentoring of student-teachers in ITTE. The relationship between terms 'quality' and 'mentoring', including the high frequency of such terms in policy reform documentation, is evident and provides a rationale for further study of policy claims. The effects of ITTE reforms are reverberating today while the claims that quality teaching can better serve children continue in outputs by the DfE and EEF.

Essentially, quality education has broad implications for global sustainability, quality mentoring has suggested benefits including closing gaps in teacher retention, and quality teaching can allegedly support the most 'disadvantaged' children in England's education system today. Today, global temperatures soar, teacher retention plummets, and the attainment gap remains unceasingly wide. We must surely question the logic that "there is nothing else to do but focus on quality" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 34).

This thesis is concerned with how the dominant logic of 'quality' has come to be seen as the only way forward, how such policy rhetoric plays out in practices and discourses in ITTE, and how it can be presented as knowledge to be imparted and 'learned' by student-teachers. Focus is given to the rhetorical nature of discourses including repetition of key terms as explored in this chapter. Later chapters additionally explore rhetorical language with particular focus on metaphors used in policy and professional discourses. Metaphors can persuade, legitimise and justify theoretical positions and dominant discourses of quality that are rooted in a neoliberal logic of competition. These metaphors, this rhetoric and this underlying logic can become part of everyday language, everyday attitudes, and everyday practices.

The next chapter will begin to consider the power of metaphors in education policy. Before this, I briefly outline the structure of this thesis below before bringing this chapter to a close.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The intention of the current chapter was to introduce and problematise the concept of quality in ITTE and interrelated terms mentoring and 'disadvantaged'. Chapter two follows with a closer exploration of policy and research literature.

Chapters three, four and five outline my theoretical framework, research methodology, and ethical considerations respectively.

Chapters six and seven explore quality, mentoring and disadvantage by focusing on secondary data. Chapter six takes on a historical dimension, while chapter seven studies one policy document (the ITTMRR) in further depth.

Chapters eight, nine and ten outline my primary data analysis. Chapter eight focuses on metaphors of survival such as 'sinking and swimming', chapter nine considers metaphors of games used by practitioners such as 'We have to play the game', and chapter ten explores the metaphorical phrase 'levelling the playing field'.

Chapter eleven extends a wider discussion of these data analysis chapters and chapter twelve concludes the thesis.

Chapter 2: Golden Threads and Silver Bullets

2.1 Introduction

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, a dominant discourse of quality exists in education today. 'Quality' can often be proposed as a solution to deeply rooted and complex problems, for example the level of inequality between children classed as 'disadvantaged' and their peers (as indicated by the widening attainment gap at primary and secondary level). In initial teacher training and education (ITTE), this discourse coincides with and legitimises reform, including calls for "high-quality mentoring" (DfE, 2021b: 9), which policy claims can have implications for another deeply rooted and complex problem – teacher retention (DfE, 2019c). It is suggested that quality mentoring can also bear some responsibility for closing the attainment gap given its proposed impact on supporting the development of quality teaching (DfE, 2019a).

In this chapter, focus turns to some of the metaphorical language that can be used in education discourses and which centre around quality education, teaching and mentoring. Metaphors can often employ terminology typically associated with games and competition. For example, in discussions of closing the attainment gap it is not uncommon to hear ambitions to 'level the playing field' which likens education to a sport. In response to quality assurance measures such as Ofsted inspections, staff in schools and universities might be heard to use the phrase, 'We have to play the game' which again relates the language of games to educational practices.

Throughout this chapter, the rhetorical influence of metaphors will be explored in a review of literature around quality reforms in ITTE. The metaphorical language under discussion includes that of the 'golden thread' which is used in DfE policy to uphold ITTE reforms as well-crafted and coherent, as well as the 'silver bullet' which can be used to promote certain ideas or strategies as solutions to complex problems. Discussion of this metaphor use is important as metaphors are rhetorical devices which can be employed to persuade. Much of this literature review chapter is therefore concerned with the rhetoric and persuasions of ITTE policy reforms as well as the logics and rationalities that are argued for in education policy and which underlie these reforms.

2.2 A Golden Thread

In 2022, a policy paper entitled *Delivering World-Class Teacher Development* (DfE, 2022a) was published by the DfE. It followed a series of policy reform documents published previously, including the *ITT Core Content Framework* (DfE, 2019a), the *Early Career Framework* (DfE, 2019b), and the *Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy* (DfE, 2019c). Following the

publication of these policy documents in 2019 came the *ITT Market Review Report* (DfE, 2021b). These collective reform documents attempt to justify and implement changes to the education and support of new teachers over the course of their training and induction years.

Delivering World-Class Teacher Development (DWTD) offers to "provide an overview of each of these reforms and how they will be delivered" (DfE, 2022a: 3) for local authorities, school leaders, school staff and governing bodies. In addition to providing an overview of initial teacher training and education (ITTE) reforms and those of the *Early Career Framework* (ECF), this overview also details teacher development beyond the early stages of a teacher's education and into "every stage of their career" (DfE, 2022a: 4) with the inclusion of updated national professional qualification (NPQ) programmes.

These reforms to teacher development are notable for their broad scope and volume, with implications for the education of student-teachers, early career teachers (ECTs), fully qualified teachers, specialists, and school leaders. In DWTD, a 'golden thread' is described to bring together this multiplicity and diversity of policy reform documentation. The 'golden thread' phrase is used twice in the policy paper. The first use is quoted here:

> Our teacher development reforms have created a 'golden thread' of high-quality evidence underpinning the support, training and development available through the entirety of a teacher's career (DfE, 2022a: 5).

The following pages then outline "how the reforms apply to every career phase" (DfE, 2022a: 5). Career phases are distinguished through four sections: 'Initial Teacher Training', 'Early Career Framework reforms', 'Specialisation', and 'Leadership.' The main focus of the final two sections is on specialist and leadership NPQs, while the first sections draw on the *ITT Core Content Framework* (CCF), the *Early Career Framework* (ECF), and the *ITT Market Review Report* (ITTMRR).

The section then closes with the second reference to the 'golden thread':

> NPQs complete the golden thread, running from ITT through to school leadership, rooting teacher and school leader development in the best available evidence and collective wisdom of the profession (DfE, 2022a: 7).

It is worth questioning what is meant by this 'golden thread' as it is described here. It is perhaps also worth questioning why there is a need for the DfE to frame ideas with a 'golden thread' in this instance. I will begin here with the second line of enquiry, as it will help to serve in informing the first.

To begin with, a ‘golden thread’ can be described as “an idea or feature that is present in all parts of something, holds it together and gives it value” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, 2025, golden thread entry). It is notable that the ‘golden thread’ phrase is metaphorical, with ‘golden’ suggesting something precious and valuable, and ‘thread’ suggesting craftsmanship through weaving. Taken together, ‘golden thread’ suggests an intention to base thoughts and actions around a core idea, or perhaps one or two central themes.

The ‘golden thread’ metaphor may also offer allusions to Ancient Greek mythology, for example the precious thread of yarn that Ariadne gives to Theseus to aid his escape from the Minotaur’s labyrinth. Likewise, threads may suggest connotations of the Moirai (or The Fates) who determine the fate of one’s life through the spinning and cutting of the thread of one’s life. Today, a ‘golden thread’ may not determine life or death in such dramatic terms, but the phrase serves as a rhetorical device which can elevate ideas towards a heightened importance and portray them as valuable and all-encompassing. In DWTD the ‘golden thread’ also suggests that, while policy reforms might seem to be extensive and complex, there is an underlying cohesion at their heart that has been carefully crafted by policymakers.

Coherence is an important factor in terms of quality education provision and is an important consideration in evaluations of teacher education systems nationally and internationally (Brooks, 2023). The idea of the ‘golden thread’ implies coherence with its overarching metaphor. So, it can be argued that the ‘golden thread’ metaphor operates in a rhetorical sense, in that it ascribes high value and high quality, as well as cohesion and coherence, to a range of policy reforms. But what is meant by this ‘golden thread’ in terms of the context of teacher development policy reforms?

In both sentences that use the ‘golden thread’ metaphor in DWTD as quoted above, there are several words, phrases and ideas that are used more than once. In addition to ‘golden thread’, both sentences mention teacher “development,” as well as the words “available” and “evidence” (DfE, 2022a: 5-7). They also both describe comprehensive lengths of time. In the first, the ‘golden thread’ runs “through the entirety of a teacher’s career” (DfE, 2022a: 5) and in the second it is described as “running from ITT through to school leadership” (DfE, 2022a: 7).

It appears that distinct elements of this ‘golden thread’ can be identified here, characterised by a base of “available evidence” (DfE, 2022a: 7) that remains at the core of teacher development throughout each potential stage of one’s career. It is also notable that in the first

sentence, the ‘golden thread’ underpins “support, training and development” (DfE, 2022a: 5) and in the second sentence it is rooted alongside the “collective wisdom of the profession” (DfE, 2022a: 7).

The ‘golden thread’ therefore depicts the requirement for an established evidence base to sit at the heart of teacher development, a cohesive long-term process that adheres to this evidence base, and the “wisdom” of professionals already working in these areas. However, the ‘golden thread’ metaphor does more than concisely explain this. “Metaphors are usually influential because they persuade us of certain ways of viewing the world” (Charteris-Black, 2004: xii), therefore we must regard its function as rhetorical; as an attempt to persuade, to convince, and to build consensus amongst various diverse stakeholders in education.

2.2.1 All That Glitters

The DWTD document was published in March 2022. In November of that year, a co-authored report was published by the Continuing Professional Development Forum of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) entitled: *Golden Thread or Gilded Cage?* (Vare et al., 2022). While its authors do offer some praise for the reforms to teacher education and professional development, concerns outweigh the benefits throughout the report.

According to the authors, positive aspects of teacher education reforms include the “provision of a coherent programme of professional development over an extended period” (Vare et al., 2022: 3). This corresponds with the idea of the ‘golden thread’ as outlined in the previous section, in that coherence is valued alongside extensive development over time. Some praise is also given towards a “recognition of the importance of mentoring and coaching” (Vare et al., 2022: 3) in policy reforms, as well as towards an emphasis on wellbeing, with the inclusion of strategies to reduce workload offered throughout.

Concerns with the policy reforms include repetition between the CCF and ECF, as well as NPQs. “Statements are repeated rather than reinforced in any meaningful manner” (Vare et al., 2022: 3) resulting in a lack of progression over time. Authors also describe “a limited research base” with “generic content that cannot be contextualised” (Vare et al., 2022: 3). Furthermore, authors note a lack of reference to the climate crisis, stating that “it is alarming to discover that the entire ‘golden thread’ from CCF to ECF to the NPQs is silent on these issues” (Vare et al., 2022: 12).

While these concerns address issues with the content of reform policy documents, there are further criticisms offered regarding the implementation of these ideas. Training is depicted as "prescriptive" (Vare et al., 2022: 4) with little opportunity for trainees and teachers to become "reflective practitioners, with a critical understanding of their practice" (Vare et al., 2022: 5). In addition, the assumption of a common starting point for all early career teachers (ECTs) can mean that continuity from the ITTE stage can be lost, "despite the golden thread narrative" (Vare et al., 2022: 3).

Other implementation concerns are directly related to mentoring. While prioritisation of mentoring and coaching continuing throughout the early stages of a teacher's career is considered a benefit, there are clear issues. Firstly, repetitive and uniform content can lead to mentors "'backfilling'" (Vare et al., 2022: 14) to close gaps. Mentoring capacity is also a concern, with more mentors required, as well as the necessity of further support and development needed for these mentors. As a result, some schools avoid recruiting ECTs due to "mentoring costs" (Vare et al., 2022: 3).

The implications for increased mentor workload are stressed. Likewise, the strain on schools is emphasised. The authors highlight the "irony that a programme designed to support the recruitment and retention of new teachers appears to have added to their workload" (Vare et al., 2022: 14). Offering an alternative, the authors suggest that improved retention of new teachers may be brought about through "opportunities for deeper engagement in different facets of education chosen by the learner" which encourage "teachers to contribute to knowledge" (Vare et al., 2022: 16) as opposed to passively receiving approved knowledge from an arguably limited evidence base.

In a wide-ranging criticism of the 'golden thread' of teacher education reform, this final point is arguably the central theme of the report. In attempting to establish an evidence-base for practitioners, policymakers have developed a restrictive and prescriptive approach that removes the need for creativity and criticality which will have impacts, not only on the retention of teachers but on teacher development and therefore the education system more broadly. To use their words, collective policy frameworks offer:

> A narrow definition of what a teacher/school should be; far from being a 'golden thread' this looks more like a gilded cage, restricting meaningful professional development. Diminishing the role of teachers and de-professionalising them in this way will surely exacerbate the retention crisis (Vare et al., 2022: 16).

Here, the rhetorical function of the ‘golden thread’ is challenged. The authors contest the underlying suggestion that this ‘thread’ of policy proposals is of a high quality and propose a new metaphor. The ‘gilded cage’ metaphor suggests a lack of freedom, coinciding with the authors perception of an evidence-base and approach that is “restricted and restrictive” (Vare et al., 2022: 12). It also questions the value or worth of teacher education reforms. ‘Gilded’ suggests being “covered with a thin layer of gold or a substance that looks like gold” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, gilded entry). The metaphor implies that the appearance of gold may only be superficial, which offers a decisive rebuttal to the ‘golden thread’ narrative - all that glitters is not gold.

As I have outlined, the function of the ‘golden thread’ in DWTD is rhetorical. It portrays a cohesive ‘thread’ over career stages with a ‘golden’ evidence-base at its heart, and it attempts to paint a picture of high-quality proposals and build a consensus for teacher education policy reforms. *Golden Thread or Gilded Cage?* (Vare et al., 2022) offers a direct challenge to this. This challenge relates to the ‘golden thread’ at different career phases, including ITTE, the ECF stage, and specialist and leadership NPQs. However, the report is arguably more focused on the ECF and NPQs. More focus on ITTE is therefore required.

In the next section I focus attention on ITTE and further consider the literature relevant to this stage of teacher education. Deliberation of the ‘golden thread’ will continue, with key consideration towards the evidence-base of teacher education and further exploration of the identity and implications of this alleged ‘gilded cage’ at this early stage in a teacher’s career.

2.2.2 The Gilded Cage of Initial Teacher Training and Education

So far, this literature review has outlined a ‘golden thread’ represented in DfE policy and considered criticism from one report. In this section, I consider some of these criticisms further with a focus on ITTE. Key considerations include elements of the supposed ‘golden thread’ in terms of ITTE policy referenced in DWTD, such as the CCF (DfE, 2019) and the ITTMRR (DfE, 2021b). Relevant academic literature from books and journals will inform the discussion throughout this section, which begins with a brief outlining of the development of ITTE reforms since 2010.

The education White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010b) indicated a shift in education policy concern towards the training of teachers. Changes that followed its publication included increasing school-based training routes for trainee teachers. Yet, despite its ambition, “the perception of ITE as a public policy problem persisted” (Mutton and Burn,

2024: 215). Publication of the *Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training* (Carter, 2015) followed, which recommended the development of "a framework of core content for ITT" (Carter, 2015: 6). The *Carter Review* (2015) is considered in further depth later (see chapter seven), but it is worth stating here that the full recommendation was that a core content framework be developed "by the sector, rather than by central government" (Carter, 2015: 6) and Carter suggested several possible sector bodies that the DfE could commission to formulate this framework.

The *Carter Review* (2015) sought to address "a number of related issues, including recruitment to ITE programmes; the knowledge base of teaching and the way in which pre-service teachers gain access to this knowledge" (Mutton and Burn, 2024: 215). Mutton and Burn describe how this in turn led towards the publication of teacher education policy documents, including the CCF and ECF, those of which make up a substantial portion of the 'golden thread' of reform.

The ITTMRR (DfE, 2021b) followed, which detailed requirements for all ITTE providers "to apply for re-accreditation, in line with a set of criteria that require strict adherence" (Mutton and Burn, 2024: 215) to the CCF, which offers suggested reading materials throughout. Following the first stage of the market review came the *Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Provider Guidance on Stage 2* (DfE, 2022c) document. This extended the review of ITTE provision from providers initially submitting "a curriculum map and up to 3 sample curriculum materials" (DfE, 2022c: 6) in stage 1, to then subsequently being required to submit an "additional selection of developed materials" (DfE, 2022c: 6) for review for stage 2.

As part of the review process, a strong alignment with the CCF and its evidence-base was encouraged. It is stated that "evidence beyond that cited in the CCF may be used, as long as it is coherent with the framework" (DfE, 2022c: 7-8). Criteria are offered for possible materials, including that:

> Claims or guidance that build on or go beyond the CCF are supported by suitably robust sources of evidence such as high-quality systematic review and claims of efficacy (causal claims) are supported by studies that contain a comparison group (for example, quasi-experimental design) (DfE, 2022c: 8).

Such specific methodological requirements narrow down the possible sources of evidence that providers might use in this case. Furthermore, any additional references beyond the CCF are required to "address and support CCF statements" (DfE, 2022c: 8). Given the high level

of risk involved in ITTE providers being “de-accredited” (Mutton and Burn, 2024: 223) for not meeting requirements, ITTE curriculum designers may likely wonder whether the high stakes would be worth the trouble.

In defining a core body of knowledge for initial teacher education via the CCF, then through a process of re-accreditation prompting ITTE providers to comply, “the determinants of quality of how teacher education programmes should be organised have effectively been entirely ‘outsourced’ to the government” (Brooks, 2023: 46). This centralised control arguably corresponds with the ‘gilded cage’ (Vare et al. 2022) metaphor, as it constructs a ‘cage’ for ITTE providers, who have little choice but to effectively align with the CCF and “support” (DfE, 2022c: 8) its statements. The threat of de-accreditation means that the risk is to their own survival as providers and practitioners.

A range of criticism followed the publication of the ITTMRR. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) expressed concern with the lack of transparency over how and why certain research studies were selected over others to form the evidence base that the report urges providers to align with (BERA, 2021). A response from The Russell Group of universities expressed similar concerns and added their argument for the “right for autonomy” (The Russell Group, 2021: 2) and academic freedom for English higher education (HE) providers.

Although the DfE focus on supposedly “robust” (DfE, 2022c: 8) evidence and research methods, a problematic idea also emerges from criticism from the UCET in a report published prior to their *Golden Thread or Gilded Cage?* publication. In their response to the market review, they remark that proposals “imply that some research is incontestable. We do not agree with this” (UCET, 2021: 2). To be ‘robust’ is to be “strong and healthy… unlikely to break or fail” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, robust entry). But in this case the inflexibility of the DfE in terms of strict alignment and adherence challenges the very nature of what good research might be, what it can do, and what its purpose is. Despite the strong criticism, the recommendations of the ITTMRR remain, as do the additional requirements of stage 2 (DfE, 2022c). Compliance is expected.

This section has described the emergence of ITTE policy reform, considering how policy priorities have shifted towards a focus on the training of teachers in recent decades. These policy shifts brought with them a highly regulated and centralised system in England, which can be summarised as “the most tightly regulated and centrally controlled system of ITE anywhere in the world” (Ellis and Childs, 2024: 2). Such centralised authority places the DfE as “the curator” (Brooks, 2023: 44) of appropriate content, evidence, and research methods

for ITTE, despite Carter's clear initial recommendations for a core content framework to be developed by the education sector and explicitly not by central government (Carter, 2015).

The next section will begin to consider how this might impact on what and how student-teachers are expected to learn given these conditions. This will be achieved with a greater focus on the CCF and the charitable organisation that assess and endorse the evidence underpinning it, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).

2.3 A Silver Bullet

> In a world of difficult choices, or trade-offs and compromises, education is one of those rare things that can solve so many problems whilst causing no new ones. The journey towards any target, milestone, or mission that a government, any government, can set, will be made quicker and easier through education. There are no silver bullets however, but education is probably the closest thing we have (Oliver, 2025).

In early April 2025, Ofsted Chief Inspector Sir Martyn Oliver said these words towards the beginning of a speech given to educational leaders in London. Oliver begins by drawing attention to "difficult choices, or trade-offs and compromises" (Oliver, 2025). He then introduces the metaphor of a 'silver bullet' which can be regarded as "a simple solution to a complicated problem" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, silver bullet entry). Oliver expresses that "there are no silver bullets" (Oliver, 2025), suggesting that there are no simple solutions to complex problems faced in the world, but adds that "education is probably the closest thing we have" (Oliver, 2025).

Oliver then lists potential solutions which education may support: economic growth, employment, reduced crime, opportunity, innovation, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, increased happiness levels, improved health services, equality, and security. He adds that, "in short, education can help us achieve almost every goal we have for our young people, our society, and our country" (Oliver, 2025). Oliver then reiterates his point about difficult choices:

> As I've said, we do live in a time of difficult choices. When every single penny has to be carefully considered and justified, even if there were silver bullets, there just simply isn't enough silver (Oliver, 2025).

Here Oliver repeats the idea that "difficult choices" (Oliver, 2025) must be made, but applies this more directly towards decisions regarding education funding. He also repeats the

metaphor of the ‘silver bullet’, but this time plays on the metaphor in an unfamiliar way while highlighting the financial connotations that the word ‘silver’ conjures. In essence, Oliver is suggesting that education is limited in its scope by the parameters of funding, employing playful metaphorical language to soften a potentially harsh message.

In the first section of this chapter, the metaphor of the ‘golden thread’ has been explored and discussed in the context of ITTE policy reforms since 2019 which seek to improve the quality of ITTE provision. This alleged ‘golden thread’ runs through the “entirety of a teacher’s career” and into “every career phase” (DfE, 2022a: 5). It is highly pervasive. Quality discourses operate at multiple levels in a policy landscape which places high emphasis on the potential power of education.

Quality education, it is claimed, has broad implications for the complex solutions which Oliver lays out. For example, quality education has broad and large-scale implications for global sustainability (United Nations, 2015; 2024), quality mentoring can hypothetically support student-teachers and serve to improve teacher retention rates (DfE, 2019c), and quality teaching is regarded as the most important in-school factor for supporting children classed as ‘disadvantaged’ with apparent implications for improving the attainment gap (DfE, 2019a).

Given its large claims, frequent usage, and suggested high importance, it might easily be considered to be presented as “a simple solution to a complicated problem” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, silver bullet entry), therefore, based on its rhetorical claims and significant status as a policy justification, ‘quality’ has become “probably the closest thing we have” (Oliver, 2025) today for a potential ‘silver bullet’ in education and in ITTE. The extent of its near ubiquity in policy discourses has been discussed in the previous chapter, but its place in the CCF, its justifications within and around that text via the EEF and its evidence base, and the suggestion that its impacts are something that student-teachers should be required to ‘learn’ will be considered in greater depth next.

2.3.1 The CCF and the EEF

“It is in the framing of social justice issues that the tensions between the economic and cultural imperatives of educational policy are most clearly revealed” (Taylor et al., 1997: viii) and in the CCF, the opening paragraph clearly frames a social justice issue in its suggestion that:

> The quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for pupils – and it is particularly important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (DfE, 2019a: 3).

The CCF is "independently assessed and endorsed" (DfE, 2019a: 2) by the EEF, a charity "dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement" (EEF, n.d.). The premise that "quality of teaching" is "particularly important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds" (DfE, 2019a: 3) can be found in research outputs from the EEF (EEF, 2018; 2022). Evidence for the claim appears in a foreword to an EEF report entitled *Effective Professional Development* in which Chief Executive Professor Becky Francis writes, "research tells us that high quality teaching can narrow the disadvantage gap" (Francis, Collin and Smith, 2021: 4).

In a footnote to the claim, Francis references a study by Slater et al. (2012) entitled 'Do Teachers Matter? Measuring the variation in teacher effectiveness in England' which attempts to control for external variables including family and home life by matching students to individual teachers using datasets across 33 schools in England. The authors of that report define teaching 'quality' in a footnote "as shorthand for the impact on test scores" (Slater et al., 2012: 630) and measure progress in student achievement in "high-stakes" (Slater et al., 2012: 630) GCSE exams in English, maths and science compared with prior attainment. Teaching quality is therefore defined by 'value-added' metrics here, where quality is linked with student attainment (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017).

Slater et al. (2012) recognise limits to their study, including potentially problematic applications for policymakers given that "good teachers are difficult to identify *ex ante*" (Slater et al., 2012: 630). Teacher quality is defined only in comparison to exam results after they have taken place, and in a narrow group of subjects too. 'Value-added' metrics can be politically attractive yet criticised for lacking an understanding of the complexity of student attainment, simplistic linear logic and validity issues (Brooks, 2021b). So, while the study may indicate that family and home life are not the sole factors in predicting educational achievement, the study does little more than define good teaching through higher student scores in selected exams and suggests an obvious conclusion given these parameters – that some teachers are better than other teachers at this specific task.

Though there is the indication of a correlation between years of teaching experience and better outcomes for pupils, the authors note that there are no observable characteristics that distinguish 'quality' teachers from their counterparts. Furthermore, in 'Do Teachers Matter?'

quality is not defined in terms of subjects beyond the core subjects chosen, nor is it considered in terms of other year groups in schools. It is nonetheless outlined in the CCF as applicable across subjects and age groups, including at primary school.

It appears that these findings based on datasets from 33 schools, with a narrow focus towards GCSE exam results as a marker for quality teaching, have become extrapolated to construct the argument that "high quality teaching can narrow the disadvantage gap" (Francis, Collin and Smith, 2021: 4). This apparent foundation of the DfE and EEF's justifications for a turn towards quality teaching and mentoring is questionable. It narrowly defines quality and presents a comparative or competitive concept, making 'quality of teaching' something that distinguishes, categorises and ranks teaching and teachers in terms of perceived quality via comparative exam results.

This is reflective of a pendulum swing in ITTE and in education more broadly, which narrows what quality teaching can mean and achieve in theoretical, methodological and ethical terms. Quality is seen as something which can improve children's grades in "high-stakes" (Slater et al., 2012: 630) exams. It is something that is measured by increasingly quantitative and econometric means, therefore policy favours findings that fit with a general "scientism" (Hordern and Brooks, 2023: 804) or "methodolatry" (Phillips, 2006: 25) of a 'what works' approach in which longstanding traditions of educational thought are marginalised and teaching is reduced to a technical and instrumental practice (Hordern and Brooks, 2023).

Such an approach claims broad applicability to research findings, despite the fact that "research can only tell us what worked in a particular situation, not what will work in any future situation" (Biesta, 2007: 20). Therefore, for all of its "robust" (DfE, 2021b: 3) evidence gleaned from favoured methodological approaches, ITTE has arrived at something of an ethical impasse, where established educational research studies, ideas and traditions can be discounted and where attention is diverted away from root causes of educational inequality as represented by the attainment gap and focused predominantly on "in-school" (DfE, 2019a: 3) factors.

The importance of the term 'in-school' in the premise that quality of teaching can help in supporting 'disadvantaged' children cannot be understated here. If removed, the premise is no longer valid. However, removal of 'in-school' from typical phrasings is not uncommon and even the CCF itself neglects the term in a sentence a few pages after it is first introduced:

> The ITT Core Content Framework has been designed in the knowledge that the quality of teaching is the most important factor in improving outcomes for pupils – particularly pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (DfE, 2019a: 5).

The *Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework* (ITTECF) too states that, "high quality teaching is the most important way to improve outcomes for pupils" (DfE, 2024a: 5). Without qualifying these claims as 'in-school' makes these assertions in isolation false. Socioeconomic factors have the largest impact on educational attainment (Reay, 2017; Smyth et al., 2018; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010) and there are many structural and societal factors beyond the school walls which impact on educational inequality and can limit what is possible for teachers to achieve in their classrooms, no matter the quality of their teaching.

It could be argued that these omissions are only errors, linguistic slips or shorthand. However, the omission persists outside of DfE policy and may easily misinform audiences. One example to close this section comes from a trade handbook for school-based mentors: "Teacher quality is so important, and quality first teaching is what makes the biggest difference to pupil outcomes" (Hughes, 2021: 10). It is perhaps not the author's intention to misconstrue or mislead the reader. It is however a statement that incorrectly promotes 'quality' as that which "makes the biggest difference" (Hughes, 2021: 10) despite the existence of complex societal factors including socioeconomic inequality. Linguistic error or otherwise, it shows the fragility of such policy claims. This example is especially significant as the literature is aimed at school-based mentors, those whose mentorship is expected to have substantial implications for student-teachers' learning in ITTE.

Like the 'golden thread' narrative has been revealed to be superficially 'gilded' in the first section of this chapter, we can begin to unravel the weak, questionable, and inadequate premise that quality of teaching can support 'disadvantaged' children. It presents itself as something of a 'silver bullet' – a simple solution for a complex problem. Yet, for all its presentation, it potentially has little applicable value in its current conceptualisation. The next section will consider these limitations further and turn towards how this rhetorical discourse of quality teaching, quality mentoring and quality education may impact on student-teachers and teacher-educators in ITTE.

2.3.2 "One solitary generic statement"

Like the CCF before it, the ITTECF is a mandatory framework today. Compliance is expected and has been inspected with the implementation of accreditation processes initiated by the

ITTMRR (DfE, 2021b) and sustained through its second phase (DfE, 2022c). Not only do the CCF and ITTECF include references to the premise that quality of teaching is especially important for 'disadvantaged' children, they also present this premise as a unit of knowledge that student-teachers are required to 'learn.'

As with its predecessor, the ITTECF outlines the core content for student-teachers to learn. Eight sections are laid out reflecting the eight Teachers' Standards that they align with. These are then split into 'Learn that…' and 'Learn how to…' (DfE, 2024a) statements. Of the many 'Learn that…' and 'Learn how to…' statements presented, only "one solitary generic statement" (Major and Briant, 2023: 21) makes any reference to children classed as 'disadvantaged' in the ITTECF as in the CCF before it. In the first section, reflecting the 'Set high expectations' standard, it is stated that student-teachers are required to 'Learn that…':

> High-quality teaching has a long-term positive effect on pupils' life chances, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (DfE, 2019a: 9; DfE, 2024a: 11).

Granted that wording differs to the common premise as discussed previously (for example 'life chances' rather than 'outcomes'), there are clear similarities here with an apparent causal link between quality teaching and supporting 'disadvantaged' children. References are provided in the ITTECF to support 'Learn that…' statements and demonstrate that they are "informed by the best available educational research" (DfE, 2024a: 5). Included in the reference list for the 'Set high expectations' standard is the EEF's 'Teaching and Learning Toolkit', as well as Slater et al.'s (2012) journal article 'Do Teachers Matter?' as discussed in the previous section for its use as a supporting reference in an EEF publication promoting quality teaching for 'disadvantaged' children.

There is no other reference to 'disadvantaged' children within the list of 'Learn that…' and 'Learn how to…' statements. It is noteworthy that while the CCF contained frequent mentions of mentoring, for example its 'Learn how to…' statements are prefixed with "Receiving clear, consistent and effective mentoring in how to…" (DfE, 2019a: 9), many of these references of mentoring have been removed in the ITTECF. This can indicate the heightened importance of mentors during the period and makes apparent the claims of mentors being a "key element" (DfE, 2019a: 3) of development in ITTE practice in the CCF.

Despite the strong endorsements for mentors in the CCF, and the "vital" (DfE, 2024b: 5) role they play in ITTECF implementation, suggested conceptualisations are potentially limiting. The ITTMRR defines mentoring as "receiving structured feedback from expert colleagues on

a particular approach – using the best available evidence – to provide a structured process for improving the trainee's practice" (DfE, 2021b: 45). A hierarchical approach is explicated here, which rejects mentoring as a reciprocal relationship in which dialogic learning can also "help mentors to engage critically with the latest research and ideas" (Oberholzer and Boyle, 2023: 36).

There is broad pedagogical contestability around mentoring approaches (Morton-Cooper and Palmer, 2000; Oberholzer and Lofthouse, 2023). However, the DfE conceptualisation of mentoring clearly favours a managerial supervisory role, situating the student-teacher as an apprentice to a master. Here we can see in policy the reverberating echoes of former Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove's assertion that:

> Teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman. Watching others, and being rigorously observed yourself as you develop, is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom (Gove, 2010).

Given this particular framing of mentoring, in which mentors are purely "directive" (Oberholzer and Lofthouse, 2023: 22) one-directional, and uncritical, their role as facilitators of 'Learn that…' and 'Learn how to…' statements, particularly as endorsed in the CCF, implies that part of their role involves acculturating student-teachers into an unquestioned belief that quality teaching can have long-term positive impacts on children classed as 'disadvantaged.' We might conclude then that CCF policy not only served to push 'quality' into educational discourses and practices at the level of ITTE management, but into the belief systems of new teachers through a process of hierarchical acculturation via mentoring.

Quality discourse then permeates education policy at multiple levels. It operates in policy documentation, significantly placed in the first sentence of the opening paragraph of the CCF (DfE, 2019a) and review of the ITTECF (DfE, 2024b) and repeated throughout ITTE policies (DfE, 2021b; 2022c), broader teacher education policies (DfE, 2022a) and throughout education discourse more broadly (EEF, 2018; EEF, 2022; Francis et al., 2021). Coupled with mentoring in both the CCF, ITTMRR and ITTECF (DfE, 2024a), it is passed on from experienced colleagues, such as class-based mentors, and communicated to new student-teachers. Furthermore, it spreads to pupil premium policy whereby school leaders are advised to direct 50% of pupil premium budgets towards improving quality teaching in what is now "the largest government-driven undertaking of its kind in England" (Riordan, 2022: 3) and therefore highly important that its claims and underlying logic are evaluated.

Riordan's study is a significant one to consider moving forwards. In a research study involving interviews with 167 school staff and a survey at 285 schools, Riordan demonstrates how, when participants were asked, 'What is the most effective way to support students facing disadvantage?' around 50% "indicated that they believe high-quality teaching to be the most effective way" (Riordan, 2022: 3). This is described in part as the result of a government strategy to disseminate educational research widely but may also operate as a vague justification for potentially ineffective strategies. Riordan gives examples of strategies used by schools, which range from installing smartboards, to hosting after school boxing clubs, and welcoming motivational speakers. All are justified by the vague belief that they can improve the 'quality' of teaching and therefore support 'disadvantaged' children (Riordan, 2022).

Riordan demonstrates how the premise that quality teaching can best support 'disadvantaged' students has become "a commonly held belief" (Riordan, 2022: 3). This idea has important implications for student-teachers and ITTE practices. The quality premise may only be found in "one solitary generic statement" (Major and Briant, 2023: 21) in the body of the CCF and ITTECF, but it sits in a framework that is tightly controlled and regulated, in which student-teachers are encouraged to engage uncritically, "unable to consider practical implications of implementing research findings" (Brooks, 2023: 45), and in which mentors and lead mentors act as managers and overseers who support students to 'learn' within these structured frameworks.

We may wonder what ineffective practices this "belief" (Riordan, 2022: 3) can justify. But we must be mindful of claims that the quality premise is useless or ineffective in itself. Despite being just "one solitary generic statement" (Major and Briant, 2023: 21) out of many, it encapsulates a powerful mentality that exists far beyond policy claims and ITTE. It is a mentality that exists in funding decisions in schools, in mentoring relationships, in the practical and technical choices teachers make day in and day out. It is a fundamental part of the professional culture of teaching today.

It is also a mentality with large implications for social justice and effectively has a power to force teachers into reflexively internalising their successes and failures (Ball, 2003), into believing that they are responsible for something that is largely out of their control (Reay, 2017), and feeling "disheartened, frustrated or confused when it does not work" (Riordan, 2022: 30) in practice. It is important then not only to question political and economic justifications nor only how effective a research intervention might be, but to question how this mentality plays out, how this mentality is negotiated and realised, and how it takes shape "in

the head, the heart and the soul" (Ball, 2016: 1047) and how it can form or reform identities and cultures in ITTE and the wider education system.

2.4 Gold, Silver and "Difficult Choices"

This chapter has discussed ITTE policy reforms over recent years with an overarching focus on metaphors of 'golden threads' and 'silver bullets.' Gold and silver are both precious metals that are rare and valuable. The metaphor of the 'golden thread' is used by policymakers to suggest cohesion and coherence between multiple policy documents related to teacher development, while the metaphor of the 'silver bullet' is used and played upon in a speech by Ofsted Chief Inspector Sir Martyn Oliver to suggest how "difficult choices" are needed when "there simply isn't enough silver" (Oliver, 2025) a rhetorical way of stating that education funding is scarce, rare and precious.

These metaphors have a rhetorical function, that is to say that their use is intended to influence or persuade. Gold and silver both bear connotations of high quality as well as high rank. While their material value as precious metals can fluctuate on global stock markets, they remain symbols of high value in public discourses and practices. For example, gold and silver medals are awarded to winners and runners-up respectively in sporting competitions. These symbols stand as markers for quality, particularly the 'gold standard' which is an enduring motif in institutional audits, frameworks and awards.

For example, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) grants gold, silver or bronze awards to HE institutions depending on their adherence to a set of standards related to student experience and outcomes as determined by the criteria set by the TEF process. In research cultures, the 'gold standard' can refer to methodological approaches which are deemed to be of a higher quality, such as randomised controlled trials (Troyer, 2022). DfE policy can adopt this perspective, promoting favoured research methodologies as "high quality" (DfE, 2024b: 5) or "robust" (DfE, 2021b: 3).

These discourses, aligned with relative or comparative definitions of quality, insinuate that institutions, teachers, and even education researchers should strive for 'gold'. Such discourses can circulate in education research cultures, with Ofsted, the DfE and EEF historically and currently tending to favour such quantitative methodologies (DfE, 2016c; DfE, 2021b; DfE, 2024b; Tooley and Darby, 1998) including randomised controlled trials (Dawson et al., 2018). The rhetorical language used in policy ('golden', 'quality', 'robust') can reflect these ideas of gold standards, quality measures and methodological rigour. Yet 'gold' is often

the top tier of a ranking system, so it is highly important to view this conceptualisation of ‘quality’ as something competitive, comparable and distinctive. Yet this frames quality in terms of exceptionality. In other words, such a comparative conception of quality will never achieve quality education for all due to its own competitive logic and in which distinctions between ‘gold’, ‘silver’ and otherwise are integral to the concept itself. It rather reflects and sets the parameters of a marketplace or ranking system, or to use a common metaphor used in education discourses today – a game.

Due to this comparative and competitive conception of quality, when such rhetoric in policy does not meet reality, “weariness and frustration” (Riordan, 2022: 2) understandably follow. In many ways this could be seen today as a natural consequence of policy directions guided by ‘quality’ discourses when “there simply isn’t enough silver” (Oliver, 2025). In other words, while schools are forced to make “difficult choices” (Oliver, 2025) following over a decade of austerity measures and fundings cuts, and teachers are instilled with a belief that wide attainment gaps are dependent on the ‘quality’ of their teaching, in comparison with different teachers in different schools and facing different contexts, it is understandable that they can begin to feel weary and frustrated.

As this chapter demonstrates, the ‘golden thread’ proposed by the DfE is in reality thinly veiled and ‘gilded’, while Ofsted speeches indicate that any educational ‘silver bullets’ lack ‘silver’, that is to say the economic means and political will to address the scale of the problems described. Furthermore, moving beyond the presentation of policy claims as valuable and well-founded on “high quality” (DfE, 2024b: 5) or “robust” (DfE, 2021b: 3) methodologies, we may begin to see here how “scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse” (Lyotard, 1984: 3) in DfE and EEF literature. Quality discourses in policy suggest a value-free, neutral ‘objectivity’ but nonetheless mask hidden subjectivities.

In the example of the EEF, who seek to ‘break the link’ between socioeconomic inequality and educational outcomes for ‘disadvantaged’ pupils, their premise that ‘quality’ teaching can close the attainment gap appears to be built on a problematic foundational study (Slater et al., 2012) which subjectively defines quality through GCSE outcomes. Essentially, when the EEF states that “research tells us that high quality teaching can narrow the disadvantage gap” (Francis et al., 2021: 4), they are shifting the narrative around ‘disadvantage’ away from external sociological factors of society, the home or the family towards a focus on schools, classrooms and teachers.

But what are the effects of such rhetorical tensions as they play out? How might researchers even begin to understand how policies and practices are enacted in schools and ITTE providers in light of the "weariness and frustration" (Riordan, 2022: 2) that accompany such rhetorical claims? In what ways does language use in policy and practice influence and persuade, and what are the effects of this language use?

The following chapters will discuss the theoretical, methodological and ethical approaches to my research study. The importance of metaphorical and rhetorical language and the effects of language use remain a key focus. While this chapter has focused on metaphors of 'golden threads' and 'silver bullets', the next chapter turns towards an enduring metaphor and its extensive proliferation in education discourses in modern times – the metaphor of education as a game.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

> Everybody knows that the dice are loaded
>
> Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed
>
> Everybody knows the war is over
>
> Everybody knows the good guys lost
>
> Everybody knows the fight was fixed
>
> The poor stay poor, the rich get rich, that's how it goes
>
> Everybody knows
>
> (Leonard Cohen, 1988).

A few years ago, I was travelling across the country to visit my parents. I spent most of the day travelling by train from Birmingham where I live now, to Hastings where I grew up. The route takes me through London and the final leg of the trip was from Charing Cross to Hastings. I boarded the train with a few minutes to spare.

Moments before the train was due to depart a man around my age came racing down the platform and onto the carriage as the doors were closing. He was red in the face, breathing heavily and sweating, but he made it on board. I remember seeing him pull out his phone from his pocket at the moment he was sitting down in the seat next to me. It was the speed of this that made me notice. It was present continuous action in a fraction of a second – 'getting phone' and 'sitting down' all at once. Then, almost as instantly as he sat down, he opened his phone and resumed playing a game he had clearly been playing beforehand.

I never spoke to that person and there was little else I remember about him, but I remember clearly the effect it had on me. I remember thinking how strange it was that before even having a chance to catch his breath he was already back to the game, matching tiles or gems or fruit or something along those lines. Before he even had a chance to regulate himself, he was plugged in and resuming from wherever he had left off. The moment stuck with me.

I also remember the situation, because on the train journey I had been reading *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by Jean-François Lyotard. The text details Lyotard's concept of "language games" (Lyotard, 1984: 9-11) which I was trying to get a better

understanding of. The first chapters of *The Postmodern Condition* were given as required reading for the first taught session of my PG Cert course – the introductory course which began my PhD in September 2021. I was drawn by Lyotard's opening chapters. I remember suggesting in that first session that they felt quite 'prophetic' in terms of describing cultural, social, scientific and political shifts in post-industrial societies.

For example, Lyotard describes the growth in economic power of multinational corporations potentially "imperiling the stability of the State" (Lyotard, 1984: 5) and he questions the effects that changes in computer technologies might have in exacerbating this instability. Lyotard also explains how advances in technology can alter "the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited" (Lyotard, 1984: 4) and subsequently lead towards requirements for increasingly quantifiable knowledge.

In reading on the train some months after that PG Cert session, I was considering Lyotard's ideas about legitimacy and trying to understand more about his thoughts around methods. Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein, Lyotard describes his "method" (Lyotard, 1984: 9) of language games, which he classes as "a heterogeneity of elements" (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv) in which meaning is made within given "rules" and "between players" (Lyotard, 1984: 9). Terms like 'quality' for example may be negotiated by different stakeholders and defined in relative or relational ways.

While reading the text, I also wondered to what extent Lyotard's ideas might inform policy analysis today and considered how "the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii) became altered over the course of the twentieth century and into modern times. So, on one hand I was trying to understand this theoretical concept of 'language games' and how it might apply to education policy and practice, and on the other hand I was beginning to notice a particular prominence of games more generally in society.

I arrived at my parent's home in Hastings, and we caught up and chatted about this and that as we usually do. Then sometime later that evening, I encountered another moment that has stuck with me and reinforced something that I had noticed on the train earlier.

We were watching *The Chase*, a television quiz show in which contestants can win a cash prize if they can outsmart and outplay the 'chaser' through successfully answering general knowledge questions. As the show played, we talked about getting tickets for the *National Lottery*, a national game of chance in which large sums of money can be won by members of the public. Occasionally, one of us would look at our phone or tablet. I caught myself playing *Duolingo*, a language learning app which employs elements of gamification (i.e. simulating

game-like experiences to motivate, engage, and hold the attention of users). My nan lived with my parents at the time. But she was out playing bingo that night.

Like with my experience on the train, I felt a culmination of ideas emerging. In that moment, I began to realise the extent to which games permeate our culture. Not only are they more plentiful and accessible than ever before via smartphone and tablet technologies, they also make up a substantial amount of the traditional media landscape in terms of television game shows and radio phone-ins. And games are also not only limited to screens as even my nan was out playing a game at the bingo hall.

These games are all examples of something habitual. I 'play' *Duolingo* every day to the point that I cannot allow my streak of lessons to be jeopardised. *The Chase* is on every weekday evening at the same time, a little before dinner time. The *National Lottery* includes several games to choose from throughout the week and these are repeated on a weekly basis. Going to buy the regular lottery ticket can be a ritual – supported with sacred good luck affirmations or charms. These habitual activities become routines. They become part of the fabric of everyday life. They become quotidian, in the sense that they are regular occurrences, but more so in that they are ordinary and even mundane.

Games can become so ordinary and everyday that they become normalised. As such, they can easily fade into the background and become a normal part of life. They can also, perhaps as a result, become part of our everyday language. Consider for example how we might talk of 'upping our game' as a way to state we want to improve at something. Or consider how we might begin a challenge with the declaration, 'the game's afoot.' Our games can even have a streak of deceit or deception to them, and we may ask of others: 'What's their game?'

3.2 Games and Education

The relationship between games and education may seem obvious to begin with. Education professionals, especially those working with younger children in early years and primary stages, will surely know the value of games and of bringing a sense of fun and enjoyment to learning. But there is more to this relationship between games and education.

The Latin name for primary school, 'Ludus' can also mean 'game' and 'play', as well as 'training'. And as demonstrated in the previous section, language can carry powerful connotations. Sometimes too the language of education practitioners can remain under-the-surface and carry assumptions and ideas that can be revealed, considered and interrogated in greater depth.

My train journey and subsequent evening with my parents, as described in the previous section, opened my eyes to an apparent ubiquity of games that I had not noticed before. It was around this time too that I was considering the kinds of phrases education practitioners can use – often in informal ways – to describe their work. The language of games can often crop up in everyday thoughts, interactions and practices including phrases such as 'playing the game', 'levelling the playing field', 'moving the goalposts', 'changing the game', and 'gaming the system.'

As a former primary school teacher and as a graduate research teaching assistant (GRTA), I have heard colleagues in both schools and in universities say, "We have to play the game," often in response to quality assurance or quality control measures. Typically, this phrase is explicitly stated (and sometimes implicitly suggested) as: "We have to play the Ofsted game." In other words, we must comply with the rules of inspection – whether we agree with them or not. Some might accuse the 'game' of being fixed, suggesting that it is not possible to succeed as rapid policy changes can mean 'moving the goalposts' and 'changing the game' for practitioners and students. Sometimes school leaders and teachers may even engage in 'gaming the system' to get an edge over their competitors. Though the prevalence of some of this informal language may appear purely anecdotal here, it is a key point of discussion with student-teachers and teacher-educators in later chapters (for example chapters eight, nine and ten) and often recognisable and familiar, particularly to longer-serving practitioners.

The idea of 'levelling the playing field' in education discourse is common today (Donnelly et al., 2019; DfE, 2022b; Major and Briant, 2023) and used in a range of formal and informal contexts. It employs the language of games and competition to describe actively creating opportunities for – or of eliminating barriers to – equality in education. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest printed evidence of the 'level playing field' phrase comes from 1979 (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). Significantly, this is the same year that Lyotard originally published *The Postmodern Condition*, which is concerned with shifts in economics and education. It is also the same year Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, a time which marks a key milestone in the paradigm shift towards an economic model of neoliberalism in England, as well as globally.

Neoliberalism can be regarded as "a set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the centre of social life" (Wilson, 2018: 2). More will be said of neoliberalism and its definitions, origins, logics, and effects in the following section. Yet it is perhaps unsurprising that this phrase 'levelling the playing field' began to emerge and gain popularity during this time, a time in which competition is highly valued and promoted as a means towards economic ends.

In the article that first printed the phrase ‘level playing field’, the author explains that it was used by the Oregon Bankers Association as a metaphor for “competitive equality” (The American Banker, 1979) in banking. The relationship between economics and education is clear and ‘levelling the playing field’ is an enduring metaphor considering its origins in the late 1970s and continued popular use today (DfE, 2022b; Donelly at al., 2019; EEF, 2025; Major and Briant, 2023; Young, 2022).

These phrases employing the language of games deserve further exploration. And we might even consider other games-related phrases that can describe the work of practitioners. As education professionals we arguably ‘play with the hand we’re dealt’, our performance measured in national and international ‘league tables’. We may find ourselves ‘back to square one’ if things go wrong, and we might even ‘lose our marbles’ along the way. But we keep going with our ‘skin in the game’.

It is these metaphorical language elements that have interested me as they interrelate with a wider discourse of quality in education. Why, when discussing education quality, do practitioners talk in terms of ‘playing the game’? Why, when discussing issues of social justice, do we talk with the games-related terminology of ‘levelling the playing field’? Why do these phrases share a common metaphorical basis? And what are the effects of speaking about education in these terms? Such questions have guided the design of this research study into discourses of quality, mentoring and disadvantage. The rest of this chapter will outline the theoretical underpinnings of this study in greater depth, with consideration towards where this language might come from and what power it might contain and enact.

My main intention has been to uncover those underpinning assumptions we bring to the table when we talk about quality in education, particularly ITTE but also those interrelated elements like inequality and social justice – the sorts of things that education *matters for*. As highlighted earlier, ideas of playing games can become normalised. They can fade into the background and become unquestioned everyday practices. It has been my intention to reveal and destabilise this under-the-surface understanding that can guide education practices to further explore, understand and challenge it.

I began this section with lyrics from a song by Leonard Cohen called ‘Everybody Knows.’ It seems many of us know that there is a game being played in education today. We play the game whether we like it or not. We know the game is fixed. It is necessary then to probe at these assumptions we seem to share, to question what it really is that everybody knows.

3.3 Theoretical Underpinnings

We may initially wonder about the origins of the language of games in education. Education exists today in a competitive geopolitical arena whereby policy reforms are largely driven by "the necessity for the country to perform better in international league tables" (Mutton and Burn, 2024: 219), such as the rankings generated by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). This competitive international ranking system can legitimise policy priorities which seek to improve teacher quality and the quality of ITTE provision. This element of competition is not limited to England as other countries also seek "to do better in order to achieve national results that are comparable to those which are the highest performing" (Mutton and Burn, 2024: 220).

But it should be said that league tables existed before the first PISA assessment in the year 2000. In England, national league tables have their origins in a series of Education Reform Acts from 1980, 1988, and 1992 (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017: 193). Beginning in 1992 with secondary schools, these league tables initially measured and defined schools' performance via their students' GCSE examination results. The percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grade A to C was an original marker for success in such rankings, which would be "frequently misinterpreted as a measure of the quality of schools" (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017: 194). This narrowly defined quality in terms of output. Furthermore, misinterpretation overlooked the complexity of context whereby a school's intake, the progress made on prior attainment throughout school, and other socioeconomic factors are ignored.

Problems arising from ranking schools with a predominant focus on attainment include a skewed concentration of "efforts and resources on pupils at the GCSE grade C/D borderline" (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017: 194), as well as more schools and teachers "teaching to the test" (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017: 194), narrowing the curriculum and the breadth of a quality education. The role of educators in such scenarios can become less about the needs, desires and lives of the students in their care, and more about the ranking, the performance and the competition that arises from the overarching influence of league tables.

The term 'performativity' can describe how educational ideals have become subsumed or replaced by demands for efficiency in modern education systems. Lyotard describes two elements of performativity in education, the first is outward-facing as countries seek to compete on an international stage, while the second is inward-facing in terms of national efforts to train the population to fulfil specific roles to maintain the running of society. So, while performativity describes an education system "designed to tackle world competition" (Lyotard, 1984: 48), the role of education shifts towards a system whereby learning institutions are "called upon to create skills, and no longer ideals" (Lyotard, 1984: 48).

Reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s was not solely about the introduction of published national league tables. Schools' performance in such rankings informed the work of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), who began inspections in 1992. It was also around this time that a national curriculum was established (1988) and the first Standard Attainment Tests – or SATs – were administered (1991). In essence, this was a time of dramatic reforms which introduced a complex combination of "high-stakes testing and market forces to the education system" (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017: 193). It also marked a time when education began to become increasingly outward-facing in terms of global competition.

The intention behind such marketisation comes with the logic that competition can create opportunities for improvement. These reforms that aim to mirror the competitive element of a capitalist market economy bring associated forms of accountability, although this can turn towards performativity, the effects of which can in fact include arguably poorer education quality for students, as well as "inner conflicts, inauthenticity and resistance" (Ball, 2003: 215) from practitioners. The competition logic also increases the stakes and the risks, not as a side effect but by design.

Essentially, countries are competing with countries and schools are competing with schools. The game-rules are established – sometimes explicitly or implicitly. And the threat of sanctions to schools, including scrutiny, takeover or closure (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017) are very real. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the threat, risk and precarity that comes with the competitive logic of market reform is extending to ITTE providers today.

This competition logic of a system of 'neoliberalism' that undergirds the shift towards a marketised system requires further exploration and will be discussed next. An understanding of neoliberalism and the competition logic are essential in establishing the theoretical underpinnings of this research study. Following this, I will outline several related concepts that shape my theoretical framework further. These concepts address some of the ways in which political, economic and educational ideas are enmeshed, how language can frame and reproduce power in policy and practice, and how neoliberalism might be addressed in educational research today.

The following sections are entitled: *Neoliberalism*; *Games of Truth*; *Power*; *Subjectivity*; and *Governmentality.* Discussion throughout these sections begins to draw on some theoretical concepts closely associated with Michel Foucault. Like Lyotard, Foucault used the language of games in his writings and lectures, particularly in his later days. However, key differences between Lyotard and Foucault centre around their distinct conceptualisations of 'language games' and 'games of truth' as will be discussed throughout the following sections.

3.3.1 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is generally regarded as an "ideology and policy model that emphasises the value of free market competition" (Britannica, 2025). There is considerable debate on what 'neoliberalism' means, though it may be considered "not as a static phenomenon but primarily as a process" (Sardoč, 2021: 2). Davies (2014) describes how neoliberal policies target "institutions and activities which lie outside of the market" to "bring them inside the market" (Davies, 2014: 310). Policy may also attempt "to reinvent them in a 'market-like' way; or simply to neutralise or disband them" (Davies, 2014: 310).

However, Davies explains that these 'markets' do not then govern and regulate themselves by their designation as 'free' markets. The state remains "an active force" producing and reproducing the rules "in ways that accord with a certain ethical and political vision" (Davies, 2014: 310). Davies makes the final point that:

> This ethical and political vision is dominated by an idea of competitive activity, that is, the production of inequality. Competition and inequality are valued positively under neoliberalism, as a non-socialist principle for society in general, through which value and scientific knowledge can best be pursued (Davies, 2014: 310).

It can be said then that neoliberalism relates to the creation of 'market-like' governance structures; an ideological and rhetorical promotion of values of freedom, though within the close confines of state regulation and control; and, an underlying logic of competition which ostensibly drives improvement via the belief that inequality drives progress. We may see here some correspondence with the language of games and begin to picture the players, the rules, risk, reward, chance, skill, winners and losers. We may also begin to consider the effects of elements of competition and performativity on education systems today.

Some of the impacts of neoliberalism on education have been noted, for example consequences arising from the publication of league tables include narrowing of curricula, teaching to the test, and an emphasis on statistics rather than students. In addition, neoliberal policy reforms can lead to a reduction of democratic forms of management, a devaluing of educators and the undermining of the profession "in the hunt for measures, targets, benchmarks, tests, tables, audits to feed the system in the name of improvement" (Ball, 2016: 1046).

But there are concerns to keep in mind regarding the term 'neoliberalism.' Ball himself acknowledges that it can be "an over-used and a loosely-used word" (Ball, 2016: 1046). Similar critiques of the term suggest that it is imprecise and vague with the potential to become "a category that catches selectively whatever a particular author chooses and disapproves" (Dunn, 2017: 435). There is cause to consider Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv) here and throughout this thesis I have attempted to be precise when using the term 'neoliberalism' while also considering its adaptability as a "process" (Sardoč, 2021: 2) rather than something fixed and unchanging. This is in part then an attempt to better understand and further conceptualise 'neoliberalism' and its effects on education, particularly ITTE.

In this section I have tried to demonstrate a working definition of neoliberalism for the purposes of this study. Considering ITTE policy through a neoliberal lens invites questions about power, knowledge and the ways in which language is used by researchers, practitioners and policymakers. In the following sections, I draw on Foucault to discuss key concepts of 'truth', 'power', 'subjectivity' and 'governmentality'. Next, I introduce Foucault's concept 'games of truth', before subsequently discussing related terminology and concepts.

3.3.2 Games of Truth

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault calls classical torture "a strict judicial game" (Foucault, 1977: 40) whereby the practice follows precise rules, methods and procedures. In line with the rules of the game, what becomes accepted as 'truth' is dependent on a victim's ability to endure the torture. The magistrate then had "a stake in the game" (Foucault, 1977: 40) as well as the accused. If the accused could hold out without confessing, then the charges were dropped and "the tortured man had then won" (Foucault, 1977: 41). 'Truth' then was entirely contingent on the methods and procedures used to extract it – that is, the 'game' itself. Therefore, in this case legitimacy comes from the truth claims of the winners of the game.

'Games of truth' are not limited to the classical age, nor limited to the topic of torture. In fact, in later life Foucault began to define and clarify his work to date in lectures and interviews, beginning to describe his shift in focus as, "not an investigation of power but rather the history of the ways in which human beings are constituted as subjects" (Peters, 2004: 50). Foucault explains further in an interview in January 1984, a few months before his death:

> In actual fact, I have always been interested in this problem, even if I framed it somewhat differently. I have tried to find out how the human subject fits

> into certain games of truth, whether they were truth games that take the form of a science or refer to a scientific model, or truth games such as those one may encounter in institutions or practices of control (Foucault, 1994a: 281).

In terms of my research study, Foucault's concept of 'games of truth' can illuminate how a particular representation of knowledge or science is promoted – in this case an "evidence-base" (DfE, 2019a: 28; DfE, 2024a: 4) which adheres to "robust" (DfE, 2021b: 3) methodologies but excludes and marginalises whole traditions of educational thought (Hordern and Brooks, 2023). How both teacher-educators and student-teachers can be "constituted as subjects" (Peters, 2004: 50) within such 'games of truth' and the effects such 'games' may have is a key line of enquiry to pursue.

3.3.3 Power

In Foucault's concept of 'games of truth', an inextricable link between power and knowledge emerges, a link which Foucault expresses explicitly: "power and knowledge directly imply one another" (Foucault, 1977: 27). As well as employing the language of games in expounding their theoretical ideas, Foucault ('games of truth') and Lyotard ('language games') also discuss 'power' and 'knowledge' as inextricably linked. Lyotard explains that knowledge and power are "simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?" (Lyotard, 1984: 9). Lyotard adds that "knowledge is now more than ever a question of government" (Lyotard, 1984: 9). Similarities between the two concepts are clear, but it is their differences that underscore the theoretical basis of this research study.

In a "little-known" (Peters, 2004: 55) conference address given by Foucault in Tokyo in 1978, Foucault elucidates a conceptual departure from the idea of 'language games', a term used by Lyotard and by Wittgenstein before him. Foucault's desire to emphasise a separation between 'language games' and 'games of truth' is significant, in a paper which, though arguably little-known can also be regarded as "one of Foucault's clearest accounts of his own approach to the analysis of power and practices of resistance" (Mascaretti, 2018: 5). Although Foucault does not name Wittgenstein in the text, Davidson (1997), Peters (2004) and Mascaretti (2018) all invoke associations with Wittgenstein in Foucault's approach and critique.

At the heart of Foucault's argument is a question of power. He argues that the role of the ancient philosopher was "an anti-tyrant insofar as he defined the systems of laws" (Foucault, 2018: 9) according to which power should be exercised. He refers to this as a "counter-power"

(Foucault, 2018: 11) though questions the extent to which philosophy has truly run 'counter' to the operations of the state to moderate and restrain power. Foucault notes a change beginning from the end of the 18th century, offering examples of "ideological, but also organic" (Foucault, 2018: 10) links between the French Revolution and Rousseau; the Prussian state and Hegel; and Leninism, the Soviet state and Marx. He asserts that some such links are paradoxical, for example links "between the Nazi state and Wagner, as well as Nietzsche" (Foucault, 2018: 10). Nonetheless, it appears that these later nation states exerted power and authority alongside philosophy, rather than philosophy necessarily acting in its ancient role as that of a "counter-power" (Foucault, 2018: 11).

In his discussion of the role of philosophy, Foucault calls for "a philosophy that would address the relations of power rather than the games of language" (Foucault, 2018: 13). There is then a critique of the concept of 'language games' and "its employment without an accompanying notion of power" (Peters, 2004: 55) here. Foucault appears to suggest that something of the role of philosophy as a 'counter-power' has become lost in some applications of the study of language. He invites this ancient role of philosophy back, stating "the role of moderation against power is still worth perhaps being played" (Foucault, 2018: 10).

Foucault also attempts to clarify a concept of power, stating that "language is played" (Foucault, 2018: 13). Power in Foucault's conceptualisation is not only that of political or state domination and Foucault saw a lack of "an adequate understanding of power as something other than a reflection of economic structures" (Rabinow, 1994: xv) that he wished to address. He advises that we "should no longer imagine that one can escape relations of power all at once, globally, massively, through a sort of radical rupture or a flight without return" (Foucault, 2018: 13). In this, he suggests that analysis and critique should move away from merely the application of grand theories of power and resistance – "more than state and institutional great struggles" (Foucault, 2018: 14).

He suggests instead a focus on how language and power play out. Like language, "relations of power too are played; they are games of power that we should study in terms of tactics and strategy, rule and accident, stakes and objective" (Foucault, 2018: 13). Here, Foucault draws on the language of games yet with a clear "accompanying notion of power" (Peters, 2004: 55). This sentence has a significant place in conceptualising a theory and approach towards an analysis of language and power. It is not only to discover particular meanings of words, but to go further towards considering how language and power are 'played' in particular 'games of truth'.

Such a concept of language and power is crucial for an analysis of the language of games and of related discourses of quality in education. It is not only in trying to unearth and describe meaning within policy texts and educational 'language games', but in considering the dynamics of power, "tactics and strategy, rule and accident, stakes and objective" (Foucault, 2018: 13) – as well as the effects – that such an interrelation of language, knowledge and power can be enacted. Given the importance of this proposal from Foucault and how it advises the specific study of language and power, the precise words used are worth closer consideration.

Mascaretti's 2018 translation of Foucault's original French text differs somewhat from earlier translations. Where Mascaretti quotes the study of "rule and accident" (Foucault, 2018: 13) along with tactics, strategy, stakes and objectives, Davidson's wording shows slight differences. Davidson quotes Foucault's advice thus: "one must study in terms of tactics and strategy, in terms of order and of chance, in terms of stakes and objective" (Davidson, 1997: 4). Between the two, there is agreement on the translations for 'tactics', 'strategy', 'stakes' and 'objectives.' However, it is noteworthy that Masceretti's translation advises the study of 'rule' and 'accident' while Davidson's translation is for 'order' and 'chance'.

Foucault's words were translated from the French: "en terme de règle et de hasard" (Foucault: 1994b: 542). Here, 'règle' can mean both rule and order, while 'hasard' can mean chance and accident as both translators suggest. 'Hasard' also relates to "fate" and "coincidence" (*Collins French Dictionary* 2009, hasard entry). The English word 'hazard' has etymological roots in the Old French 'hasard' or 'hasart', which originally defined a "game of chance played with dice" as well as "a throw of six in dice" around the thirteenth century, before evolving into later meanings of "chances in gambling", then "chances in life" until eventually associating with a "chance of loss or harm, risk" by the mid-sixteenth century (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2020: hazard entry).

Neither Mascaretti's translation of 'hasard' as 'accident', nor Davidson's translation of 'hasard' as 'chance' communicates this lexical link between 'hasard' and 'hazard', but it is nonetheless important to consider, particularly given the high stakes that 'quality' discourses can generate and the hazards, risks and precarity that can emerge when policy plays out in ITTE practices. To stress, in considering the words used in this sense, it is not just the language of happenstance and coincidence that requires our attention in an analysis of how power operates, but the associated language of jeopardy and risk. When we speak of chance or accident, we are talking of the whole range of meanings these words offer, including danger and threat.

Foucault here proposes various elements that require study, which relate to terminology of games but also, crucially, to the related neoliberal ideology that bridges “competition and inequality” (Davies, 2014: 310). There is then an unmistakable severity to the idea of ‘games’ as Foucault employs it. We would be wise to recall here too that Foucault’s application of ‘games of truth’ as a concept is demonstrated through the physical brutality and precarious fragility, as well as the ultimate threat of fatality, that is at play in classical methods of torture as a means to seek or establish ‘truth.’

3.3.4 Subjectivity

Foucault attempted to frame his focus towards how subjects are constituted in ‘games of truth.’ In a 1982 essay entitled ‘The Subject and Power’, he describes two meanings of the word ‘subject’:

> Subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to” (Foucault, 1982: 781).

In the same essay he outlines three “modes of objectification” (Foucault, 1982: 777) which turn human beings into subjects. These are described in the first place as those “which try to give themselves the status of sciences”, in the second as “dividing practices”, and then lastly in “the way a human being turns himself into a subject” (Foucault, 1982: 777).

There is an element of complexity to this concept of subjectivity. It is arguably a necessary complexity as it challenges typical critiques of political power, a critique “which ignores individuals, looking only at the interests of the totality” (Foucault, 1982: 782). Foucault’s conceptualisation of subjectivity disrupts such ideas by suggesting a complex political structure of “individualization techniques and of totalization procedures” (Foucault, 1982: 782). Totalisation means treating something or someone as having one character, principle or application. Individualisation here may suggest both the tailoring to an individual as well as the process of making one individual distinct from another. Foucault’s suggestion of subjectivity being formed by “dividing practices” (Foucault, 1982: 777) bears relevance here, and it is worth adding that subjects may be “divided inside himself or divided from others” (Foucault, 1982: 778).

Subjects are constituted by forms of knowledge, including those which give themselves "the status of sciences" (Foucault, 1982: 777) and those which frame one's identity by "a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault, 1982: 781). Subjectivity therefore is a "multidimensional relationship (to others, to things, and to ourselves)" (Rabinow, 1994: xxxi). It does not merely describe one's sense of self, one's emotions and feelings but the constitution of that self and the "power-knowledge relations" (Foucault, 1977: 27) at play in this constitution of self. Neither is subjectivity a mere antonym for 'objectivity' to describe that which exists in the mind rather than the external world. In his expansive meaning of subjectivity, Foucault challenges Cartesian dualism, the idea of a split between mind and body. With this, he also challenges orthodox ideas around objective truth and rationality.

As stated previously, according to Foucault the subject is constituted not through objective truths but 'games of truth' or 'truth games' in which truth becomes contingent to the specific 'play' of power-knowledge relations. The idea of games here is again important as it stresses another key element of subjectivity – the importance of autonomy. In most cases, "the subject is a free citizen, endowed with personal desires and enmeshed in a network of dynamic relations with others" (Rose, 1991: ix-x). Given the role that autonomy plays in 'games of truth', there are important questions of governance and self-governance to explore.

3.3.5 Governmentality

Concepts discussed so far indicate that subjectivity is constituted within 'games of truth', that is the methods, relations, tactics and procedures that define knowledge, including self-knowledge, in given frameworks. Truth and knowledge are therefore contingent on negotiations within these frameworks, mediated by power relations which are neither necessarily over the body nor over the mind, nor necessarily upon specific individuals, rather it is that which exists within and between relations to things, people and even to ourselves.

Foucault additionally uses the term 'governmentality', depicted as the "art of government", "government rationality", as well as "the conduct of conduct… a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect" (Gordon, 1991: 1-2) the conduct of individuals. The term 'governmentality' has the dual purpose of,

> doing the necessary critique of the common conceptions of "power" (more or less confusedly conceived as a unitary system organized around a center that is at the same time its source, a system that is driven by its internal dynamic always to expand); analyze it rather as a domain of strategic

> relations focusing on the behavior of the other or others, and employing various procedures and techniques according to the case, the institutional frameworks, social groups, and historical periods in which they develop (Foucault, 1994d: 88).

Foucault begins to introduce the idea of 'government' into his analysis of forms of subjectivity and its constitution. This concept of 'government' is not synonymous with an idea like the 'state' or a political party in rule of a nation. It includes "the government of the self by oneself in its articulation with relations with others" (Foucault, 1994d: 88).

In the publication of a 1978 lecture entitled 'Governmentality', Foucault describes the historical development of this "art of government" (Foucault, 1991: 92). He suggests three related types of government: self-government, government of the family, and the ruling of the state, respectively tied to morality, economy, and politics. Foucault suggests links between these forms of government and describes the emergence of a popular interest towards an 'art' of government from around the sixteenth century. He describes how literature around the time was concerned with making the ruling of the state like that of the patriarchal government of a family.

This model is described and justified as a matter of "economy" (Foucault, 1991: 92) in the sense that it addressed a strategy aimed at "how to introduce this meticulous attention of the father towards his family into the management of the state" (Foucault, 1991: 92). 'Economy' in this case describes, for example, the management of individuals, goods and wealth within the family, and of "making the family fortunes prosper" (Foucault, 1991: 92). Foucault explicitly states that this "is the essential issue in the establishment of the art of government: introduction of economy into political practice" (Foucault, 1991: 92). With this concern of running a state like that of a father running a family – that is, in applying a concept of 'economy' to state government – came forms of power relations requiring "surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of a family over his household and goods" (Foucault, 1991: 92).

Foucault describes how the model of the family as an analogy for the rule of a country is eventually superseded by the mid-eighteenth century with "the emergence of the problem of population" (Foucault, 1991: 99). National and global factors related to populations such as epidemics, mortality, labour and wealth could not be reduced to the family model of government only. The idea of the family was still important, but as "an element internal to population, and as a fundamental instrument in its government" (Foucault, 1991: 99). Despite

this shift however, traces of the old model remain including the importance of economy, as well as forms of power such as surveillance and control that maintain it.

What then follows with this evolution is a “new science called political economy” (Foucault, 1991: 101). Foucault continues:

> The transition which takes place in the eighteenth century from an art of government to a political science, from a regime dominated by structures of sovereignty to one ruled by techniques of government, turns on the theme of population and hence also on the birth of political economy (Foucault, 1991: 101).

This is not to say that domination via “sovereignty” has disappeared. In fact, Foucault states that “the problem of sovereignty is made more acute than ever” (Foucault, 1991: 101), proposing not that power of sovereignty is replaced by disciplinary power or governmental power. Rather, he describes “a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government” (Foucault, 1991: 102). By the end of his lecture, Foucault has defined a complex form of power “which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security” (Foucault, 1991: 102).

Others have embraced and built upon Foucault’s concept of governmentality since Foucault’s lectures from the late 1970s and these developments must also be considered in order to discuss and co-produce those “various procedures and techniques” (Foucault, 1994d: 88) that Foucault indicates towards in developing an analysis of governmental power. The original conception of governmentality was formed and expanded on by fellow researchers at the Collège de France where the lectures were given (Gordon, 1991). Gordon for example highlights the historical element of Foucault’s conceptualisation adding the importance not only of power, but also resistance. Consideration is required of “the way history of government as the ‘conduct of conduct’ is interwoven with the history of dissenting ‘counter-conducts’” (Gordon, 1991: 5).

Later, Rose (1991) and Dean (1999) would employ analysis along the lines of Foucault’s governmentality. Dean, for example, highlights an analysis of government which considers not only relations of power and authority, but interrelated concepts of self and identity. His analysis encompasses how thought is “linked to and is embedded in technical means for the shaping and reshaping of conduct and in practices and institutions. Thus to analyse mentalities of government is to analyse thought made practical and technical” (Dean, 1999: 18). Dean here

shows how subjectivity can be formed and shaped and highlights the importance of the interrelations between thought and action.

In recent years, governmentality has formed the basis of an interdisciplinary field of research termed “governmentality studies” (Walters and Tazzioli, 2023: 1). Additionally, the concept of governmentality informs research practices that focus on a proliferation of public policies which incorporate the use of behavioural sciences. This critical research into policy and practice employs the term ‘neuroliberalism’ a portmanteau combining the prefix ‘neuro-’ with the term ‘neoliberalism.’ Neuroliberalism builds upon Rose and Dean’s concepts of governmentality to consider the effects of a

> mobilization of novel cognitive strategies, emotions, and pre-cognitive affects as a way of securing preferred forms of social conduct while ostensibly supporting liberal orthodoxies of freedom (Whitehead et al., 2019: 633).

More than an analysis of power as a set of rules and laws, governmentality offers a broader scope, considering conduct and behaviours and their formations and constitutions under forms of power and resistance. More than an analysis of knowledges and meanings, it considers how these thoughts and logics play out in practices and institutions. More than an analysis of the inhibiting and restricting dominance of sovereignty and discipline, it expands to include the agency of individuals. It reminds us too that “power in a society is never a fixed and closed regime, but rather an endless and open strategic game” (Gordon, 1991: 5).

In ITTE today, policy proposes an enduring premise that ‘quality of teaching’ is particularly important for ‘disadvantaged’ pupils. This policy proposal presides over ITTE reforms and is even a ‘Learn that…’ statement in the CCF and ITTECF. This suggests that such a premise is more than rhetoric, evidence, or knowledge. It is a constellation of all of these things and more. It is a belief, an attitude, a mentality – that which is to be ‘known’, ‘taught’ and ‘learned’ by practitioners through instruction, accreditation and via relationships between one another, for example in mentoring relationships, “through the mediation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977: 198).

A theoretical basis of analysis via an understanding of ‘governmentality’ as well as the related concept of ‘neuroliberalism’ therefore supports this research study, which not only seeks to understand the effects of reform on institutions and practices, but the effects of reform on individuals at cognitive, emotional and intellectual levels. The research study takes the form

of a governmental analysis of a neoliberal policy reform landscape in ITTE, one that constitutes the subjectivities of teacher-educators and student-teachers in 'games of truth' in education discourses, policies and practices today.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined an idea that appears to permeate modern-day education, particularly in England. It is not an idea that is limited to England, and it has roots in ongoing historical and global developments. It is marked by a market logic of competition which sits at the heart of education reforms today. Its scope is international and far-reaching, yet it has implications for national policy. It informs the practices that take place in classrooms every day, and it is often inseparable from ourselves, existing internally "in the head, the heart and the soul" (Ball, 2016: 1048). It is the framework which suggests that in order to survive, as teachers, as leaders, as schools and as providers, *we have to play the game.*

This is a powerful idea that manifests in many ways. One specific way in which I consider this idea throughout this thesis is the way in which it manifests as a sociocultural conceptualisation amongst educational practitioners. This conceptualisation appears to be supported by rhetorical language, which is passed on, inherited, diffused, and shared throughout a teacher's career. In order to explore the way in which this language operates as a form of power, I have outlined some key ideas and terminology throughout this chapter, including significant ideas proposed and discussed by Lyotard and Foucault which will aid my analysis in later chapters.

To summarise, the term 'neoliberalism' captures a political and economic logic and process. One element of this process involves bringing things that are not already in the market into the market or reinventing them within the logical framework of the market. An underlying competitive logic of the market composes a framework for how practitioners might think and act, and of what knowledges are shared, discussed and embraced in ITTE practices. Foucault might call such a framework a 'truth game' in which power 'plays out' and whereby subjectivities of individuals can be constituted via relationships with power, knowledge, individuals and themselves. Within the market logic of competition there comes an inseparable element of risk, precarity, and hazard.

Foucault's term 'governmentality' considers the historical process of the "introduction of economy into political practice" (Foucault, 1991: 92), which can alter power dynamics and involve new and different forms of surveillance and control of populations. It describes a complex form of power and suggests an approach towards analysing "thought made practical

or technical" (Dean, 1999: 18). These ideas can help to conceptualise and discuss some of what has happened in ITTE reforms in recent years. ITTE is presented today as a market, therefore an analysis that questions the methods and tactics of such reform is required. There is a strong form of control over which kinds of knowledges are acceptable and there is the risk and threat of de-accreditation for providers who do not follow the rules. These reform tactics do not only have the power to change institutions but to change practitioners and professional cultures too.

Foucault is also of interest for his use of the language of games, a key focus of this study. Like Lyotard, both use 'games' in explaining philosophical ideas and social theories. Taking inspiration from Wittgenstein's concept, Lyotard sees language as shaped and regulated by its "rules" and "players" (Lyotard, 1984: 9) and so defining what can and what cannot be said in different contexts, discourses and knowledge systems. Foucault similarly describes knowledge and truth as conditional and determined within specified 'games of truth,' a phrase he formed out of dissatisfaction with the formerly used phrase 'regimes of truth' which could not capture the key element of individual autonomy which he saw as necessary in analyses of power.

In many ways, the conceptual ideas of Lyotard and Foucault serve as analytical reference points that help in articulating a process of market reform in ITTE today. They both suggest how a highly competitive logic of the market can have effects on the individuals involved. They indicate the risks of cultures of 'performativity' whereby policy centred around geopolitical competition can encourage education practitioners "to exert themselves competitively, and produce 'scores' of who is winning and losing" (Davies, 2014: 315), potentially skewing the purposes of education towards competition above all else. But a question remains: can theories based around the language of games themselves consider *why* such language endures?

In other words, there is a need to depart from Lyotard and Foucault somewhat in order to consider in greater depth how this analogy or metaphor of 'the game' can operate, as well as to consider how such theoretical ideas can be incorporated into a research methodology. While Foucault's idea of 'games' emphasises their high stakes and severity, there are undoubtedly connotations that games carry that can make them seem light-hearted, fun, superfluous, or trivial. But this ideology of competitive inequality carries real costs. There are consequences, risks and hazards which come from playing games in education.

It has been my intention to consider the language used to define educational practices in game-like ways, to analyse the power of language and how that language enacts power itself, and to articulate the effects and consequences of such power in education policy and practices today. The next chapter outlines how I have designed my research study with these intentions in mind.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods

4.1 Introduction

> What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses; coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal (Nietzsche, 1873: 180, original emphasis).

As demonstrated in the last chapter, both Foucault and Lyotard employ the language of games in expounding key theories which explore connections between language, power, knowledge and truth. Throughout my research study, I am both interested in the potential application of these theories but also interested in the metaphor of 'the game' itself. Why, for example, were Lyotard and Foucault both drawn to expressing their ideas through this metaphor? How was such language popularised in theories, discourses and ideas around social justice, such as in the phrase, 'levelling the playing field' which began circulating around the same time (see section 3.2)? How has a metaphor of games come to seemingly express an attitude of cynical compliance in phrases used by education practitioners such as 'We have to play the game'?

The origins of these metaphorical expressions may be attributed to Wittgenstein. However, before Wittgenstein coined the term 'language games', Nietzsche was using the language of games to express how ideas could be "permutable as a die" (Nietzsche, 1873: 182) and how 'truth' is akin to the play of "a game of dice" (Nietzsche, 1873: 182). Given the use of metaphors relating to games from both Wittgenstein and Nietzsche, we not only see how they have come to emerge in concepts from Foucault ('games of truth') and Lyotard ('language games') who were respectively inspired by Nietzsche and Wittgenstein in their approaches. We can also see that such metaphorical language use is not limited to the late-1970s, therefore the language of games can be seen to predate the 'neoliberal' times in which it appears to commonly circulate.

In his essay entitled *On Truth and Falsity in Their Ultramoral Sense*, Nietzsche employs metaphorical language while also discussing rhetoric including metaphor at length, suggesting that metaphors can become invisible with repeated use. They stand as 'truths' for the fact that they have become "illusions" (Nietzsche, 1873: 180) or taken-for-granted assumptions that we

can no longer see. They can become “binding” (Nietzsche, 1873: 180) through their repeated use over time, becoming embedded into our languages and cultures. But Nietzsche is not against metaphors in general and he employs metaphorical language throughout the essay. For example, he utilises metaphor to make his point that “worn-out metaphors” are “coins” (Nietzsche, 1873: 180) whose faces have worn with repeated use over time.

It is important to note how Nietzsche describes the effects specific to repeated or worn-out metaphors. They “have become powerless to affect the senses” (Nietzsche, 1873: 180) and therefore we become dull to them and to their rhetorical effects. In the same way that games have become everyday occurrences (see section 3.1) and the language of games has become commonplace in education practices (see section 3.2), words, phrases and metaphors and the attitudes they represent can become normalised. Much like those frequent and persistent words in ITTE policy such as ‘quality’ and ‘mentor’ (see section 1.3.1), as well as the commonly used phrases of ‘playing the Ofsted game’ and ‘levelling the playing field’ in education practices and discourses (see section 3.2), there is a certain power in their seeming powerlessness. They became so much a part of the general makeup of our cultures that they become “forgotten” (Nietzsche, 1873: 180). For education practitioners, they become *the air that we breathe*.

How have these words and phrases become so embedded into our language, our cultures, and our practices? How have these words and phrases, through a kind of attrition via repetition, in policies, discourses and practices, become part of our everyday professional language, cultures and selves? Such questions have informed the research design of my study. Ultimately, I formulated three formal research questions to explore, investigate and interrogate such ideas further. I present these research questions next. Following this, the remainder of this chapter will then demonstrate the methods, approaches, strategies and practices I have employed throughout this research study in order to answer such questions. These are presented in two main sections which follow the research questions, outlining my methods of data collection and data analysis.

4.2 Research Questions

I present here my research questions for the study. These are interrelated questions which inform one another as part of a larger whole. A short rationale follows each research question. The intention of these rationales is to support the *why* of my choice of approach. Following this, in sections entitled *Data Collection* and *Data Analysis*, I detail the methods in their

technical and practical terms. The intention of these sections is to support the *how* of these methodological choices.

4.2.1 Research Question 1

What are the historical and political conditions that constitute a logic of competition and inequality in ITTE and education today?

My first research question interrogates the ways in which we have reached a current moment in which 'quality' of education is central in policy reform, in which "high-quality mentoring" (DfE, 2021b: 9) is presented as the mechanism which will support quality teaching in ITTE, and in which proposed effects of quality include closing gaps in teacher retention targets and closing attainment gaps between 'disadvantaged' children and their peers.

Foucault used historical study to investigate how ideas can become formed over time. His emphasis on historical study is distinct. He stated that he was not a historian who was only interested in the past. He instead suggested that his intention was to write a "history of the present" (Foucault, 1977: 31). Foucault's historical approach shifted over time from what he termed 'archaeology', for example his methodological approach in works like *The Order of Things* (1970) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), towards what he would term 'genealogy', which he began to employ later in his career, beginning with *Discipline and Punish* (1977).

'Archaeology' and 'genealogy' can be seen as distinct, but it can be suggested that the latter is rather a continuation or a reformulation of the former. For example, while 'archaeology' can be described as a critical analysis of systems of knowledge, 'genealogy' builds on this with an underlying focus on power relations. A genealogical methodology "tries to see the establishment of certain discourses as legitimate and standard forms of knowledge, their undermining of other knowledges and the power mechanism" (Karim, 2021: 73) that operates them.

There are historical conditions which have given way to political justifications for particular policy proposals today. These political justifications can often be marked by implicit suggestions that there is no other way. What Fisher terms 'Capitalist Realism' can apply to current justifications for neoliberal market reform to ITTE. Fisher draws on Margaret Thatcher's declaration that "there is no alternative" (Fisher, 2009: 12) to a current acceptance of

capitalism as it is. Capitalist realism may further be associated with a 'language of necessity' which Dahlberg et al. (1999) conceptualise as language defined

> by what is *not* said – when the possibility of alternative positions, understandings and approaches is not acknowledged, and when the choice of a particular position, understanding or approach is not presented and explained as a choice that has been made but rather is assumed and taken for granted as the only one available (Dahlberg et al., 1999: 2, original emphasis).

This 'language of necessity' may be seen in ITTE policy reforms in the notably high frequency of modal verbs 'will' and 'must' in the ITTMRR (DfE, 2021b). These words carry connotations of certainty and obligation and suggest a coercive approach to reform. The 'language of necessity' is evident elsewhere, for example when (as described in chapter one) Professor Becky Francis suggests that "there is nothing else to do but focus on quality" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 34) in a meeting centred around education 'recovery' for 'disadvantaged' children following the outbreak of COVID-19. Such language is powerful.

A genealogical approach can "renew acquaintance with the strangeness of the present against all the attempts to erase it" (Dean, 1999: 44). My intention then, has been to write a "history of the present" (Foucault, 1977: 31) that considers the operation of power in order to destabilise the taken-for-granted discourses, policies and practices around 'quality' and 'mentoring', the language and attitudes that centre around 'disadvantaged' children that can often serve to legitimise reform, and the metaphorical and rhetorical constructs that can produce and reproduce language, discourses, knowledges and practices in ITTE today.

Such an approach, which considers the interplay between historical ideas and the present 'language of necessity' that may erase or hide alternative ideas and perspectives, is fundamentally important for developing an understanding of the conditions which constitute a neoliberal logic of competition and "the production of inequality" (Davies, 2014: 310) in education and specifically ITTE today.

However, further questions arise. Considering the current policy focus on quality teaching and mentoring for 'disadvantaged' children in ITTE and education more broadly, at what point does a 'history of the present' begin and end? In other words, what

is included and what is excluded from the analysis? Such questions inform the *Data Collection* and *Data Analysis* sections of this chapter.

4.2.2 Research Question 2

To what extent can rhetorical and metaphorical language constitute, reproduce and justify discourses and practices related to policy reforms, particularly in terms of quality in ITTE?

My second research question investigates the ways in which rhetorical language can function in policy as well as in professional discourses. In part, this question is concerned with repetition of words and phrases in ITTE policy in terms of their rhetorical effect, for example the high frequency and significance of keywords 'quality' and 'mentoring' as demonstrated in chapter one. This question is also concerned with enduring metaphorical phrases, mostly those of which are centred around the language of games as explained in chapter three. Both overuse of keywords and overuse of "worn-out metaphors" (Nietzsche, 1873: 180) can be rhetorically powerful as persistent repetition can allow such words and phrases to fade into the background, "powerless to affect the senses" (Nietzsche, 1873: 180), normalised, and unquestioned.

A metaphor is a figure of speech that describes "by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, metaphor entry) to something else. From its ancient Greek etymological origins, metaphor can mean "carrying across" (Kelen, 2007: 15). Yet, it is also "difficult to define for once and for all" (Kelen, 2007: 15) given the great deal of literature on the subject and the number of writers who have tried to define it or expand upon it. Therefore, there is a wide conceptual variation whereby metaphors can be difficult to pin down. "Still, we do understand and learn about the world through metaphors" (Kelen, 2007: 16), therefore a consideration of the pedagogical function of metaphors is also required.

Kelen situates Aristotle's *Poetics* as a point of origin in the development of metaphor analysis but also notes how Aristotle employs metaphor in defining the concept. For example, literal language is considered "unadorned" while metaphorical language is an "adornment" (Kelen, 2007: 16). Even Kelen's etymological translation of the Greek could be argued to be metaphorical as words and their meanings are not literally 'carried' across from one to another. I also used metaphorical language in the previous paragraph to suggest that metaphors are hard to define or 'to pin down'. All this can show that metaphors are difficult to disengage from, as well as the fact that we do not always use metaphors knowingly. Rather they are part of our

everyday language, used without necessarily a purposefully rhetorical intention by speakers. This is especially the case for those which Nietzsche calls “worn-out metaphors” (Nietzsche, 1873: 180) which can become forgotten illusions of truth after repeated use.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) bring attention to the hidden power of metaphors, which was only “a matter of peripheral interest” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: ix) in their time. In their book *Metaphors We Live By,* they suggest that metaphors are far more than adornments to language but part of our “ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 3). Since Lakoff and Johnson, approaches to the analysis of metaphor have increased. More recently, Ng focuses attention on how,

> The analysis of metaphor can help probe ideological structures and foundations in text and talk, and discern the concepts and ideologies purveyed in discourse. In short, metaphor can no longer be seen as merely rhetorical or decorative, but also constitutive of reality, and acknowledged for its ideological character (Ng, 2018: 215).

Ng (2018) suggests the importance of both “text and talk” (Ng, 2018: 215) in metaphor analysis. For this purpose, my approach considers formal policy as well as more informal, conversational language. Therefore, this study focuses not only on ITTE policies, but also the everyday language and discourse of practitioners. It was also necessary to somehow draw out the metaphorical language under investigation.

To gain an understanding of the ways in which rhetorical and metaphorical language constitute, reproduce and justify discourses and practices in ITTE, a multi-layered approach was undertaken which could allow for analysis of both “text and talk” (Ng, 2018: 215). Consideration of the collection and analysis of such data are outlined further in the *Data Collection* and *Data Analysis* sections of this chapter.

4.2.3 Research Question 3

What are the effects of rhetorical and metaphorical language on discourses and practices in terms of ITTE policy reforms?

Mottier (2008) bridges a gap between ancient aesthetic and modern linguistic approaches to metaphor analysis. Returning to ancient works, she suggests that Aristotle’s *Rhetoric,* building upon his *Poetics*, can be helpful in shifting the analytical focus from merely interpretation of

language towards the power relations that can be produced. Mottier also draws on Foucault's ideas of subjectivity and the constitution of the self in suggesting that metaphor analysis should consist of three elements, focusing on the "poetic function", the "constitution of identity" and "the effects of metaphors" (Mottier, 2008: 192). Not only does this broaden the scope of metaphor beyond traditional conceptualisations of power towards a "more diffuse network which cannot be reduced to the state alone" (Mottier, 2008: 191) as well as an explicit focus on the effects of power relations, but in returning to Aristotle it also suggests that the literary, poetic, and fictional function of metaphors can have a place in metaphor analysis today.

Metaphor can often be contrasted with simile, but, while a simile uses the word 'like' or 'as' to compare things with similar characteristics, a metaphor does not. A metaphor can seem stronger than a simile, which Kelen (2007) attributes partly to historical trends, including a shift from lengthy "Victorian verbiage" (Kelen, 2007: 13) towards more concise Modernist stylistic aesthetics. In removing seemingly unnecessary words such as 'like' and 'as' however, there is a potential blurring between literal meaning and literary or rhetorical meaning. Therefore, there is a question of interpretation when it comes to metaphor use. Kelen (2007) adds that there is a "potential ethical problem" (Kelen, 2007: 14) in this conceptual ambiguity whereby "metaphor tells us that one thing actually *is* another thing which it is not" (Kelen, 2007: 14; original emphasis). This would seem to correspond to Nietzsche's suggestion that metaphors can be illusory.

Metaphors and similes can also 'play' with meanings by stretching the imagination to what might be comparable. Notable literary metaphors can play on such meanings and even blur the lines between metaphor and simile. In his eighteenth sonnet, William Shakespeare asks "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (Shakespeare, 1609) seemingly unsure whether – and perhaps how – to present a metaphor or simile. William Wordsworth's well-known line of poetry, "I wandered lonely as a cloud" (Wordsworth, 1807) can also lead to questions of intent and interpretation with a possible ambiguity in the line being read as either a simile or metaphor.

It would appear safe to suggest that phrases like 'playing the Ofsted game' and 'levelling the playing field' are metaphors and not similes. However, the intention of the speaker and the interpretation of the listener both matter in terms of the impacts and effects of the phrase. In all cases (and including Foucault's 'games of truth' and Lyotard's 'language games'), it has been important to consider the ethical problem of interpretation that Kelen (2007) suggests. This ethical problem extends into rhetorical and political domains, as there is a need to ask of metaphors: what did the speaker intend, and what were the effects on the listener?

A writer whose works bridged the gap between the literary and the political, George Orwell, speaks decisively of metaphors, particularly their potential for political power. In his essay *Politics and the English Language* he describes the use of metaphor in a way that resembles Nietzsche's ideas around "worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses" (Nietzsche, 1873: 180). He offers a series of rules for writers, the first being: "never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print" (Orwell, 1960: 156).

Orwell classes such repeated language as "prefabricated" (Orwell, 1960: 156) phrases. They are phrases "in which commonly made associations are reiterated, not challenged" (Jones and Wareing, 1999: 39). The very nature of overused metaphors as 'prefabricated' elements of language make them a less obvious choice for typical analysis, but it also makes them potentially politically powerful and therefore in need of analysis. Orwell suggests that political language "has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness" (Orwell, 1960: 153). He goes on to say that political language "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" (Orwell, 1960: 157).

My research is concerned with how words and phrases can become used or overused to the point where they can become quotidian, normalised, and therefore unchallenged. But as Orwell suggests, whether speakers intend it or not, "prefabricated" (Orwell, 1960: 156) language can carry powerful political meaning. The common and frequent use of such language suggests that while highly visible, their meanings and their power can be hidden, or rather, hidden in plain sight. This work is about bringing the assumptions they carry out from hiding, that is, to reveal to us what is already there. This is the role of philosophical work:

> Not to discover what is concealed, but rather to make visible what precisely is visible, which is to say to make appear what is so close, so immediate, so intimately connected with ourselves that we cannot perceive it. Where the role of science is to make known that which we do not see, the role of philosophy is to make visible that which we do see (Foucault, 2018: 12).

This section has outlined my research questions for this study. These questions have been an attempt to make visible what is visible, as Foucault suggests. There is then a question of *how* this has been done. What approaches to a research investigation can serve to destabilise

such normalised, quotidian and everyday language? How can one make such assumptions somehow strange and therefore open our eyes to what has been in front of us all along?

The following sections outline my research methods for this study, firstly considering my data collection methods, then my approach to data analysis.

4.3 Data Collection

To approach these research questions, a range of data collection methods have been employed allowing for a layered approach to the analysis of policy and practice. In this section I outline my primary and secondary data collection methods.

4.3.1 Primary Data

Primary data was collected from student-teachers and teacher-educators from one university in Birmingham, England. Participants were all based in the Primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) department from a range of positions, roles, routes and courses. The data collection period took place across two academic years, 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. Methods involved online questionnaires with student-teachers and semi-structured interviews with student-teachers and teacher-educators.

In total, 59 online questionnaire responses were collected. Student-teachers were invited to take part in the study via messages sent to their student Moodle pages. Invitations to participate were also offered following some lectures attended on the university campus. Participants could choose to remain anonymous or provide their names and opt-in for further contact and invitation to interview. Questions all related to being a mentee to a mentor, therefore online questionnaires were only made available to student-teachers and not to teacher-educators.

Questionnaires consisted of Likert scale questions, which measure participants' perceptions and attitudes (Kusmaryono et al., 2022) towards quality mentoring and placement experiences, data monitoring questions, and a section for student-teachers to provide their own comments. These comments are discussed further in chapter eight (see sections 8.2 and 8.3), data monitoring is discussed in chapter five (see section 5.3.3), and responses to Likert scale questions are discussed in Appendix A.

Student-teachers who agreed to further contact were invited to interviews following participation in online questionnaires. Teacher-educators were invited by email invitations sent to university staff in the Primary ITE department. A total of nine student-teachers and six teacher-educators took part in individual and group interviews across a total of twelve interviews. As part of my research design, I had intended to conduct interviews face-to-face with participants (reasons for which will be explained below). Mostly due to convenience for participants, all who lead busy lives with multiple professional and academic demands, six participants met online for interviews via Microsoft Teams (see Appendix B for details).

All nine student-teachers interviewed were on PGCE courses. Although questionnaire responses extended to final year student-teachers on BA Primary Education with QTS courses, none agreed to participate in interviews following questionnaires. In group interviews, groupings were always separated by professional role, therefore student-teachers only interviewed in groups with other student-teachers and teacher-educators only interviewed in groups with other teacher-educators.

My approach involved conducting semi-structured research interviews “with a given agenda and open-ended questions” (Cohen et al., 2018: 199). Research interviews have the advantage of pinpointing specific conversation themes, and they can also take participants outside of their normal everyday practices to reflect on ways of working, thinking and talking in terms of educational practices. Rather than a structured approach which involves a linear line of questioning, or an unstructured approach that may become unfocused, my semi-structured approach allowed for a general focus on core concepts such as ‘quality’, ‘mentoring’ and children classed as ‘disadvantaged.’ It also allowed for a thematic focus on metaphorical language and specifically the language of games. During these semi-structured interviews, I had questions (see Appendix B) to select from and to guide participants, but my approach allowed multiple ways in to discussing them.

This approach involved foregrounding games in face-to-face interviews. To do so, I set a number of traditional games and board games on tables as an attempt to bring the abstract idea of game metaphors like ‘playing the game’ and ‘levelling the playing field’ out into the open. My intention was to literally bring games to the table to reify metaphors that compare education to a game and uncover their everyday emergence in education discourses. This was then an attempt to “make appear what is so close, so immediate, so intimately connected with ourselves that we cannot perceive it” (Foucault, 2018: 12).

I present two photographs next (Figure 5 and Figure 6) demonstrating how this was arranged.

Figure 5. Photograph depicting traditional games and interview questions.

Figure 6. Photograph depicting a ‘Snakes and Ladders’ board game and interview questions.

As the photographs show, games were laid out on tables for interviews. The first photograph (Figure 5) shows dominoes, pick-up sticks and playing cards and the second (Figure 6) shows the board game 'Snakes and Ladders'. Participants were welcome to play the games on the tables, though there was no obligation to do so. Some of the games chosen not only represented the wider metaphor of education as a game inherent in phrases like 'playing the game' and 'levelling the playing field' but also offered a vocabulary for speaking about concepts like 'disadvantage' in various ways. For example, the presence of the board game 'Snakes and Ladders' as depicted in the photograph can lead to questions about disadvantages ('snakes') and advantages ('ladders') in schools, placements and universities.

Keywords like 'quality', 'mentor' and 'disadvantaged' were often key areas of focus in interviews, but opportunities to talk about advantages and disadvantages in ITTE and education more broadly were open possibilities with this approach. These opportunities were significant as research studies into mentoring relationships can typically focus more on those regarded "as successful, or with positive outcomes" (Haddock-Millar, 2017: 164). Therefore, there is a need "to explore both positive and negative outcomes to fully understand and appreciate mentoring relationship implications from a variety of perspectives" (Haddock-Millar, 2017: 164). Discussing the 'snakes' and the 'ladders' of student-teachers' experiences in this way allowed for opportunities to address such a research gap.

Using an approach that brings the "worn-out metaphors" (Nietzsche, 1873: 180) of games to the table was also done with the intention of bringing the more informal, conversational and even subversive language of game-playing such as 'playing the game', 'moving the goalposts' or 'gaming the system'. This language may not be typical in formal research interviews where "a participant may be saying what she thinks she ought to say" (Scheurich, 1997: 67), therefore this methodology could often bring forth the more clandestine and surreptitious language that can occur (often as informal, conversational responses to 'quality' discourses) in order to present new ways in to talking about 'quality' in a research interview.

While this was intended, using games in this way was not always possible for every interview. Online interviews were not set up with the physical presence of games (as shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6) due to being held online. Metaphors about games and education were still discussed with participants in these interviews with the same intention to uncover the everyday language and discourse of practitioners and to bring out the metaphorical language under investigation. The physical presence of games was the only notable change in the interview process for those held online. Effects of these differences are considered in chapter eleven.

The next section will discuss secondary data collection before I outline how data was analysed for the study.

4.3.2 Secondary Data

Analysis of metaphors requires consideration of both “text and talk” (Ng, 2018: 215) and while questionnaires and interviews can depict some of the “effects of metaphors” (Mottier, 2008: 192), a wider exploration of the policies and texts which underlie discourses around quality – including metaphorical language of games – is required to consider the discursive environments in which subjectivities are constituted. However, there are possible conceptual tensions when employing primary methods of questionnaires and interviews and aligning these with some of the theoretical perspectives outlined in chapter three. These tensions will be addressed firstly in order to then articulate my secondary data collection choices.

Fadyl and Nicholls (2013) question the suitability of employing interview methods in research informed by theoretical concepts articulated by Foucault. Due to the historically, culturally and socially situated nature of a research interview in a particular space and time, to rely on research interviews alone can be problematic. It is therefore important to consider how “the knowledge that we currently hold dear is unstable and contingent” (Fadyl and Nicholls, 2013: 25). Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2017) add that “there are no set rules or procedures” (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2017: 2) to assign to approaches which employ ideas derived from Foucault. However, they indicate that research interviews can express “participant’s accounts and narratives” (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2017: 7), which are critical to gaining an understanding of the effects of ‘quality’ reforms in ITTE.

For the purposes of my study, questionnaires and interviews were supplemented by secondary data analysis. Considering how research interviews can more closely align with a focus on a ‘history of the present’ (as Fadyl and Nicholls recommend) and ‘discourse’ (as Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine recommend), choice of key texts is necessary to develop a necessary understanding of the historical, cultural, and social factors which constitute ITTE policy claims and trajectories today. Attention to such factors and conditions not only ensured I could answer the research questions as set out earlier in this chapter more fully, it also allowed for closer alignment and cohesion between my primary and secondary methods.

Choosing key texts that can serve to interrogate modern day ideas about ‘quality’, ‘mentoring’ and the education of ‘disadvantaged’ children raised questions of scope. In terms of historical

study, how far into the past should one investigate? In terms of the multiple policy documents accompanying reforms in ITTE today, how might one manage the breadth of these policy documents? As 'discourse' can refer to "institutionalized patterns of knowledge that govern the formation of subjectivity" (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2017: 2), one starting point lay in the "descent" (Foucault, 1988: 145) of such institutionalised patterns of knowledge.

Although keywords under investigation ('quality', 'mentoring' and 'disadvantaged') were not widely used in education discourses centuries ago and in the context used today, some underlying principles including defining what education might mean in terms of quality, a focus on training through hierarchical supervision, and efforts to educate large numbers of children – particularly those from poor socioeconomic backgrounds – can be found in the early days of mass education, and specifically in the monitorial systems of education as promoted by Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster. My historical focus therefore begins here, not necessarily with the origins of my keywords, but with the emergence of some key ideas which inform and surround these keywords today. The first text explored is Andrew Bell's *An Experiment in Education* from 1797.

From this historical starting point I then "isolate the different scenes" (Foucault, 1988: 140) over time which bear some relation to education reform, notions of 'quality', the correct training of teachers, and ways of educating children from poor households or workhouses. Joseph Lancaster's *Improvements in Education* (1805), James Kay-Shuttleworth's *The Training of Pauper Children* (1839), and David Stow's *The Training System of Education* (1846) are notable texts which are drawn on to demonstrate the trajectory of educational reform in the nineteenth century. Justifications for reform can often include rhetorical language including metaphor, therefore the metaphorical justifications for reform are also considered.

Education reform continues into the twentieth century. Significant political reform comes in the form of *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, more commonly known as the Beveridge Report (1942). Education acts are also significant in terms of education reform allowing for greater access (*Education Act 1944*) and introducing market-driven approaches (*Education Reform Act 1988*) to education. By the 1990s and 2000s, the keywords 'quality', 'mentoring' and 'disadvantaged' begin to emerge and proliferate into common discourses along with some developing ideas of various elements of education becoming arguably like a 'game'. A notable example is in the title of Sir Michael Barber's influential book, *The Learning Game* (Barber, 1996).

A ‘history of the present’ does not end neatly as traces of this history still exist today. However, for the sake of my analysis, I choose to phase the historical study into a more political and present study after this period. In doing so, rather than attempt to analyse broad reforms in ITTE further I choose to focus on a close reading of one key reform policy document. As a result, my textual analysis of secondary data takes place over two chapters with the shift from a broad historical analysis of education reform (chapter six) to a close textual analysis of one significant ITTE policy paper from recent years (chapter seven).

As chapter one and two have demonstrated elements of the complex landscape of ITTE reform today, this close reading is important in order to avoid vague generalisations of the uses of language and the power it enacts. The chosen text is the *ITT Market Review Report* (ITTMRR). It has already been shown (in chapter one) to be of interest for its “significant recurrence of terms” (Gillies, 2008: 687) including ‘quality’ (161 counts) and ‘mentor’ (143 counts). Additionally, because it is a ‘market review’, it is a key text for an analysis of neoliberal powers of market reform. Close analysis of texts can reveal how language, knowledge and power facilitate persuasions and changes to practices as well as constitute subjectivities in professional cultures and in the minds of individuals and this is a powerful text with large implications for ITTE, therefore a crucial one to study.

In summary, my primary methods include online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Secondary methods include historical and political analysis of selected texts from the late eighteenth century to the modern day. The methods used supplement and inform one another. My approach to their analysis is outlined next.

4.4 Data Analysis

This section outlines the data analysis approaches employed in the research study. Given the use of different methods, various approaches to analysis were required. These forms of analysis are explained in the following sections entitled *History of the Present*, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, *Narrative Analysis,* and *Metaphor Analysis.*

4.4.1 History of the Present

As previously stated, Foucault used historical study to investigate how ideas can become formed over time. Between an ‘archaeological’ and ‘genealogical’ approach, my analysis of a ‘history of the present’ more closely aligns with ‘genealogy’ which considers an underlying focus on power relations. While there is no explicitly defined genealogical method, Foucault

demonstrates his approach in his writing. For example, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault traces the birth of the prison describing punishment throughout different time periods.

Foucault focuses on key texts, initially contrasting reports of a public execution with a timetable to demonstrate how "the entire economy of punishment was redistributed" (Foucault, 1977: 7) in Europe and the United States over time. Drawing on Nietzsche, Foucault later posits that genealogy should not be seen as a quest for "origins" (Foucault, 1988: 144) but rather an investigation of the "descent" (Foucault, 1988: 145) of ideas. Additionally, genealogy is work which examines "preconceptions" (Foucault, 1988: 141) and the seeking of "that which was already there" (Foucault, 1988: 142).

My 'history of the present' begins at the end of the eighteenth century, outlining the experimental formulation that would come to be known as the monitorial system of education. I then trace the descent of ideas around mass education of children, particular those from poorer households and the training methods of its teachers. Focus is given to how these ideas develop over time as well as how traces of the meanings and practices of these systems may reoccur or reappear in successive systems of education over time including in the present.

This approach "requires patience and a knowledge of details and it depends upon a vast accumulation of source material" (Foucault, 1988: 140). Recent literature occasionally supplements the source material to provide necessary context, though critical attention towards the framing of history is considered in those cases. My study is concerned with emergences and traces of ideas around 'quality', 'mentoring' and 'disadvantage' as well as the logics of ranking, competition and hierarchical observation which undergird and maintain such ideas. It is essentially an analysis which is concerned with governmentality, that is "the introduction of economy into political practice" (Foucault, 1991: 92) as well as the forms of power, surveillance and control that come with economic practices and developments.

4.4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

Building from this historical focus, I also employ critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA allows researchers to "investigate the ways in which key terms are used, and the extent to which particular policies and practices are consistent with our moral vision for education" (Taylor et al., 1997: 19). Through questioning "relationships between language and society" (Rogers et al., 2005: 365), CDA can support an investigation of how power operates in policy. This is then a form of analysis which can move beyond merely a search for meaning but an exploration of how "new tactics of power" (Foucault, 1977: 23) may operate within education policy.

A rhetorical focus was triggered by noticing a “significant recurrence of terms” (Gillies, 2008: 687) in the ITTMRR (see section 1.3.1). The words ‘quality’ and ‘mentor’ appear with high frequency throughout the text. CDA encourages focus not only on the words and their meanings, but the power that such words can carry, the identities and relationships they can produce, and the social, cultural and professional ideologies they can construct. CDA allows for consideration of how “language is played” (Foucault, 2018: 13), how it can exert certain powers, and the effects of such powers.

Today, there is a “commonly held belief” (Riordan, 2022: 4) that ‘quality teaching’ is the most effective way for schools to best support children classed as disadvantaged, a belief which Riordan demonstrates has risen in the last decade. CDA can support an analysis of the interplay between language, relationships and society to question how such a supposed “moral vision” (Taylor et al., 1997: 19) has become widespread and begin to question what effects this can produce or reproduce.

4.4.3 Narrative Analysis

Lyotard expresses how scientific knowledge is inseparable from narrative. Science employs “narrative as its authority” (Lyotard, 1984: 29). In many ways, ‘quality’ discourses in ITTE today are a kind of narrative, marked by the “language of necessity” (Dahlberg et al., 1999: 2) exemplified by Professor Becky Francis when she suggests that “there is nothing else to do but focus on quality” (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 34). Scientific discourses are argued for, and we may see one narrative promoted over another through such argumentation. A dominant narrative exists today which suggests that ‘quality teaching’ is the most effective way for schools to best support children classed as disadvantaged.

Such an overarching metanarrative (Lyotard, 1984) can become a belief (Riordan, 2022) supported and reinforced through the repetition of the narrative element of this scientific discourse. “Identity formation involves the formulation of specific forms of narrative which constitute commonalities and differences between self and others” (Mottier, 2008: 192), therefore narratives can describe events and even scientific ideas, but they can also establish and construct identities.

My research study involves listening to student-teachers and teacher-educators in ITTE today. The stories they tell, the identities they construct, and the relationships they form are highly important to researching how policy operates and the effects of its power, therefore elements

of narrative analysis (NA) are considered, including ways in which individual narratives can "bring together the micro (personal) and the macro (social or institutional)" (Souto-Manning, 2014: 163) contexts of discourses and practices. With such overarching metanarratives about 'quality', 'mentoring' and 'disadvantaged' children built on unstable foundations, it is crucial to listen to the stories of practitioners today, to understand their experiences, to learn how these narratives 'play out' or even confront the "reiterated, not challenged" (Jones and Wareing, 1999: 39) words, phrases, and narratives that circulate in professional discourses today.

4.4.4 Metaphor Analysis

Narratives can be seen as potential "building-blocks of discourse" (Mottier, 2008: 192) while metaphors can be seen as potential "building-blocks of both narratives and discourse" (Mottier, 2008: 192). As outlined in this chapter, an important element of my research design involved bringing the physical presence of games to the table in interviews. This was a way to bring metaphors of games in education from the abstract into concrete reality and therefore into focus. As suggested, reiteration of "prefabricated" (Orwell, 1960: 156) metaphorical language can become "fixed, canonic and binding" (Nietzsche, 1873: 180). Metaphors can blend into the background of discourses and become unquestioned assumptions.

As previously mentioned (see section 4.2.2), Lakoff and Johnson's book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) stands as a foundational text in the study of metaphor analysis and suggests how metaphorical language can form our conceptual frameworks and determine how "we both think and act" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 3). My research study is concerned with this idea. However, where some metaphor analysis (MA) explores conscious rhetorical choices like political speeches (Charteris-Black, 2004), I am also interested in how metaphorical and rhetorical ideas are spread and shared by colleagues, teachers, mentors and other professional peers. That is to say that metaphors are not only distinctive of individual cognitive processes of how one might "think and act" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 3), nor only passed on by powerful political commentators, they are shared and transmitted culturally and at times perhaps even unknowingly.

The central metaphor underlying the phrase 'We have to play the game' is one example worth exploring in this regard. The phrase does not come as a policy directive, yet it may be something akin to a collective professional response to policies or discourses. It is not necessarily consciously shared as a rhetorical device in order to persuade practitioners to engage in particular practices, but it is nonetheless influential and powerful. Consideration of what 'power' is and how it operates is nonetheless an important underlying element of MA

which requires moving beyond traditional or structural conceptualisations of power towards a "more diffuse network which cannot be reduced to the state alone" (Mottier, 2008: 191).

Therefore, as Mottier suggests, my conceptualisation and employment of MA is derived from a view of metaphors as possible "building-blocks of both narratives and discourse" (Mottier, 2008: 192). As such it fits alongside (and within) NA and CDA approaches. Some recent approaches to MA (i.e. cognitive linguistic approaches) incorporate specific style conventions. Although "upper case is reserved to represent the abstract thoughts underlying metaphors" (Charteris-Black, 2004: xv) in such methodological approaches (for example 'WAR IS HELL' or 'LIFE IS A JOURNEY'), I choose not to adhere to these style conventions in my analysis.

While meaning is an important element in the study of metaphors, it is not the only concern. In other words, it is not only a question of what a metaphor means, but – crucially – what it can do, how it operates, and the effects of its power. Additionally, even if metaphorical meaning were to be simplified into a short statement, such meanings are not necessarily so easily fixed. For example, 'gaming the system' cannot be easily summarised as 'EDUCATION IS A GAME' because the metaphor also implies performativity, deceit, manipulation, exploitation, coercion and strategy. Such a simplification of a complex idea is potentially more unhelpful and less fruitful than navigating its complexity.

Metaphor is therefore an important feature of narrative and discourse. While NA and CDA are more commonly used in education and ITTE research to analyse policy and interview transcripts, MA is less so. This analytical gap in education research is an important one to explore in order to "probe ideological structures and foundations" (Ng, 2018: 215) to uncover the "cultural ideas, ideals, values, and beliefs" (Cochran-Smith, 2005: 3) within the hidden and illusory "truths" (Nietzsche, 1873: 180) of our times.

4.4.5 Summary

Rather than a sequence of separate analyses, these approaches are used in combination throughout my data analysis. Here I outline a short summary of the data analysis chapters to come.

Chapter six begins a history of the present. Given findings that metaphors can be employed to justify reform and legitimise educational practices at certain times in history, I also consider elements of MA in the chapter. Chapter seven builds upon the history of the present bringing more focus on CDA to support the analysis. Rather than a focus on the many keywords used,

I instead focus on repeated (though to a lesser degree than 'quality' and 'mentor') words and phrases which relate to the language of games and competition. As a result, this chapter also incorporates some elements of MA.

Chapters eight, nine and ten focus on primary data analysis (questionnaires and interviews). Narrative is important to these chapters and these narratives can be supplemented by metaphorical language. Therefore, I consider a combination of NA and MA while still focusing on the interplay of language, relationships and society that CDA can highlight. Considering Fadyl and Nicholls (2013) recommendation, this primary data is also considered in terms of the history of the present in terms of how subjectivities can be constituted and formed within larger historically, socially, culturally and politically situated discursive locations.

4.5 Conclusion

As a collective set of research methods, there is scope for an analysis of education policy and its effects that is grounded in a historical perspective, but one that is "of the present" (Foucault, 1977: 31) in terms of its outlook and stance. My approach also allows for the study of texts both in the formal sense of education policy, yet it reaches for the more informal 'talk' that professionals might engage in that traditional research interviews might potentially miss or obscure in their established formalities.

It may be argued that such a broad range of research methods can become confusing or vague. I recognise this and I also recognise that there are potential blind spots to be aware of. There are no perspectives from school-based mentors, school leaders or policymakers, nor are there perspectives from children, classed as 'disadvantaged' or otherwise. The perspectives I do have are not necessarily representative of a general population of teacher-educators and student-teachers. But they can tell their stories nonetheless and these stories are worth telling and sharing.

What I have approached is the development of a collection of methods which can fulfil the investigation of a series of research questions as outlined in this chapter. Rather than seeking a methodological purity, "what we need in policy analysis is a toolbox of diverse concepts and theories – an applied sociology rather than a pure one" (Ball, 2006: 43), one that attempts to research the "macro" as well as the "micro" (Ball, 2006: 43), the general complexity of policy as text, as discourse, and the effects that it produces.

The next chapter turns towards the ethical considerations of the research study.

Chapter 5: Ethical Considerations

5.1 Introduction

My research methods are in part an attempt to destabilise and problematise current ideas in education policy, discourse and practice. This research is particularly targeted towards rhetorical language and the effects that it can produce or reproduce in educational practices. I specifically focus on the significance of interrelated words like 'quality' and 'mentoring' and the ways in which they can be legitimised through policy claims, including the addressing of widening gaps in the education system, such as the attainment gap between children classed as 'disadvantaged' and their peers.

While this focus is situated on the rhetoric of quality teaching and mentoring supporting 'disadvantaged' children, policy claims centred on 'quality' also include improvements to teacher retention rates (DfE, 2018; 2019c) and global sustainability (United Nations, 2015; 2024). There are certainly important implications for investigating the underlying logic of ITTE reforms given the high stakes and significance of these suggested effects, with social justice and sustainability – both in terms of a teacher workforce, and of natural resources that allow for ecological survival – as suggested intended outcomes. Therefore, there are moral and ethical issues at the heart of this research project as policies present problems and propose the right ways to solve them. Additionally, my primary research methods collected data from student-teachers and teacher-educators. Adherence to ethical principles for such methods are required and ethical considerations are given throughout this chapter.

My research methods as outlined in the previous chapter demonstrate an attempt to unearth some of the rhetorical ideas, strategies and logics used and communicated in education policy, including the use of repetition and metaphor as persuasive techniques. This research study is concerned with ways in which metaphorical and rhetorical language (such as 'playing the game') can be constituted and transmitted in professional cultures, therefore this is not only an attempt to analyse the power of policy, but also the potentially hidden power that can come from the dispersal and transmission of such language between practitioners.

Education policy poses problems and solutions which are presented with a particular ethical rationality. Bøyum (2014) highlights the significance of OECD policy recommendations on international education policies. The argumentation used in OECD texts can be seen as "normative; that is, about what is right and wrong, just and unjust, fair and unfair" (Bøyum, 2014: 856). OECD policy recommendations suggest the promotion of equity and equality. Yet arguably this "discourse has been co-opted into economic rationality" (Bøyum, 2014: 857) in

which a narrow view of fairness is presented which has the main purpose of optimising economic growth via an agenda of market reform.

“Fairness is defined in isolation from social justice in general” (Bøyum, 2014: 858). Therefore, there is a tension to be addressed in the internal ethical logic of policy. This apparent normative ethical stance presents policy problems and solutions alongside an economic rationality of neoliberalism, which promotes what is fair and right via its “certain ethical and political vision” (Davies, 2014: 310). This vision is guided by principles of “competition and inequality” (Davies, 2014: 310) that are valued as positive forces for good. Educational reform via policy is therefore determined within the frames of a problematic ethical vision which values competitive inequality. My research considers the effects of the ethical, political, neoliberal logics that undergird education policy reforms. Therefore, there are undoubtedly important questions of ethics, morals and values to consider in the stance of this research project – including my own stance as researcher.

Furthermore, there are questions to ask about my own research design and its underlying ethical principles. For instance, my study is concerned with rhetoric. There is an element of deceit and persuasion in rhetorical policy claims. But elements of rhetoric can also be used by practitioners – perhaps knowingly or unknowingly. There are ethical principles to consider at multiple levels, and a sensitivity is required for approaching such questions at these different levels.

In this chapter, I outline ethical considerations of my research design. Attention is given to important elements of ethical research practices including recruitment and participation, data storage, and risks and benefits to participants. The chapter also includes a positionality statement which articulates and discusses my own stance as a researcher and its relevance to the research process.

5.2 Principles for Research

Five principles make up the UK Committee on Research Integrity’s *Concordat to Support Research Integrity*. These are honesty, rigour, transparency and open communication, care and respect, and accountability (UKCORI, 2025). This chapter demonstrates my ethical considerations in line with these principles. The research study received ethical approval from the university’s Health, Education and Life Sciences Faculty Academic Ethics Committee (see Appendix C) and adhered to Birmingham City University ethical guidelines.

Ethics in research studies are historically and socially situated. That is to say that ethics is defined by its place in time and its space in a particular culture. Malone (2020) notes a trend of ethical decline in recent years:

> We do not have to look long or far to find examples of individual or professional behaviour in government, business, religion, or education that would have at one time garnered attention as unethical, but which now barely register on the social radar (Malone, 2020: 79).

Adherence to ethical standards is crucial to avoid becoming blinkered by being solely "guided by one's own internal, and potentially fickle, sense of values" (Malone, 2020: 83). Yet conversely, reliance on a set of principles alone may suggest that responsibility for ethics involves simply following set rules. Ethical considerations must therefore move beyond the deontological and researchers must develop a balance of a personal and professional code of conduct. For example, along with the five values on the concordat (UKCORI, 2025) as listed above I also consider my own flexibility as a researcher, my own stance or positionality, an approach towards critical thinking, and the different kinds of power dynamics that can occur in relationships with participants.

It is additionally important to ensure that ethical considerations continue beyond initial stages of receiving ethical approval granted by the university. Ethical decision making must remain "an actively deliberative, ongoing and iterative process of assessing and reassessing" (BERA, 2024: 8) approaches and issues as they arise. Research integrity therefore involves navigating personal and professional ethical principles throughout the entire research process.

This chapter outlines the ethical considerations for my research study. It consists of the following sections entitled *Recruitment and Participation, Risks and Benefits,* and *Data Storage.* I discuss considerations of access; consent; equality, diversity and inclusion; and anonymity and pseudonymity throughout. I outline my stance as a researcher in the section entitled *Positionality* before then concluding this chapter.

5.3 Recruitment and Participation

As detailed in the previous chapter, my approach involved primary and secondary data collection and analysis (see sections 4.3 and 4.4). There are important ethical procedures, guidelines and responsibilities to consider regarding primary data collection and analysis due to working with participants (BERA, 2024). My research has involved a range of participants

including student-teachers and teacher-educators. Student-teachers could be respondents to online questionnaires, interview participants, or both.

This section outlines important elements of my research process. Prior to collecting data from participants, I sought access permission and informed consent. This will be outlined further in the following sections entitled *Access* and *Consent*. Consideration of the identities of participants is important at all stages, as is the protection of these identities. These considerations will be outlined in the sections entitled *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, and *Anonymity and Pseudonymity*.

5.3.1 Access

My participants included student-teachers and teacher-educators from one university. As all were either students or staff within the university's Primary ITE department, the first point of contact was the Primary ITE course director. Access request letters were initially sent to three universities based in the Midlands, chosen for their large scale and provision of multiple routes into ITTE. These were of interest due to these similarities and for the fact that large-scale institutions can be underrepresented in research literature on quality in ITTE (Brooks, 2021a).

Out of the three universities approached, two rejected access and one granted permission for access. Reasons for institutions not taking part included not having capacity at the time the study took place. Further consideration is given to this element of the research design in chapter eleven (see section 11.3.2).

5.3.2 Consent

Informed consent and the right to withdraw consent were important ethical considerations for the research study in line with ethical guidelines (BERA, 2024; UKCORI, 2025). Prior to collecting data, all participants were made aware of the research process including the processing and usage of data. Online questionnaire respondents were given information about their participation before starting the questionnaire. Respondents had to declare their consent in order to proceed with the questionnaire. After submission, participants could still opt out at any time. All participants were made aware of this via the participant information given at the start of the questionnaire and all had access to my email contact details so could request an opt-out at any time.

Student-teachers could optionally include their email address to questionnaires. It was stated that they would be contacted for follow-up communication including interview participation. Teacher-educators were initially invited to a group interview session via email. For interview participants, a consent form was shared with an accompanying participant information sheet. Where possible, these were sent via email in advance of meeting such as when participants registered their interest to take part or accepted a meeting invite. Participant information sheets and consent forms were also printed and made available at all interviews. Time was given for participants to read both forms and sign to give their consent.

All participants were reassured that their data would only be processed by me with some potential additional support from my supervisors. No data was to be disclosed to any third parties and data has solely been used for research purposes. In all cases participants were told that they may stop participating at any point with the participation information sheet explaining how they may do so (my contact details were given along with those of my supervisors) and reminders offered throughout the research process.

In every case, I was responsible for obtaining consent. Physical consent forms (signed in-person) have been kept in a locked drawer for the remainder of the study. Digital consent forms (sent via email) have been saved to an encrypted OneDrive account which I have sole access to. All consent forms are to be destroyed by the end of the registration period (December 2025).

5.3.3 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

In addition to asking student-teachers questions about perceptions and experiences regarding quality and mentoring in terms of ITTE courses and placements, questionnaires included data monitoring questions to allow for the consideration of ethical issues related to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Kara and Wilson (2022) highlight problems around teacher recruitment, retention and representation in the teacher workforce with regard to protected characteristics as outlined in the *Equality Act 2010*, as well as the potential intersections between these characteristics. Such issues persist and continue to be researched today.

For example, a recent NFER report demonstrates how “all ethnic groups except white are under-represented at all career stages of the teaching profession, except for initial teacher training” (Worth et al., 2022: 2). The authors explain that there is an over-representation of “all ethnic groups except white” (Worth et al., 2022: 2) at the application stage to ITTE. Following

this, representation declines at every stage: acceptance to ITTE courses, enrolment to ITTE courses, and achievement of QTS. The decline continues into leadership positions.

Such findings can alert researchers to significant issues regarding EDI and 'quality' discourses. For example, given policy claims of a 'golden thread' running "through the entirety of a teacher's career" (DfE, 2022a: 5), we must question who exactly this 'golden thread' serves, and who it does not. We must also question why this decline begins to emerge during ITTE. What happens during ITTE to drive student-teachers away at every stage, particularly student-teachers belonging to "ethnic groups except white" (Worth et al., 2022: 2) as identified by the authors of the NFER report?

Race is one protected characteristic outlined in the *Equality Act 2010* which clearly highlights that EDI is a necessary concern in terms of teacher retention in ITTE and beyond. It is therefore important for education researchers to consider EDI in research that works with participants. Like Kara and Wilson (2022) indicate, researchers should also consider intersections between protected characteristics. Attention is required regarding "cultural, religious, gender, and other differences that need to be respected" (Creswell and Creswell, 2018: 89) as does my own positionality as a researcher.

Allowing for an inclusive environment requires building trust as well as being open and honest about research aims. Additionally, given that protected characteristics can potentially identify participants, prioritising anonymity and pseudonymity for the protection of participants must take precedence. Therefore, in my analysis and dissemination I ensure that identifiable data is limited to strictly what is necessary and ensure that participants cannot be identified.

5.3.4 Anonymity and Pseudonymity

Before agreeing to take part, all participants were told that their data would be either anonymised or pseudonymised to protect their identity in research dissemination. Questionnaire participants were anonymised, and interview participants were pseudonymised. Questionnaire respondents had the option to remain anonymous, and many chose to do so. Some gave names and contact details for further follow-up and to take part in interviews. For the purposes of dissemination of findings from questionnaires (presented in chapter eight) I choose to anonymise respondents as 'questionnaire participant', abbreviated to QP and affixed with a number indicating the order of the response. For example, questionnaire participant 39 is the first quoted and referenced as QP39 in the chapter.

As interview participants gave more detailed, personal and contextual responses, their names have been pseudonymised. This also means that questionnaire participants are easily distinguished from interview participants in research dissemination. Interview data was initially transcribed with codes replacing names. Codes described the participants role ('ST' for student-teacher and 'TE' for teacher-educator) and numbered in order. These codes were then assigned a name. Table 2 outlines the names used for each participant.

Table 2. List of pseudonyms used for student-teacher (ST) and teacher-educator (TE) interviewees.

Code	**Pseudonym**
ST1	Sophie
ST2	Amira
ST3	Grace
ST4	Ella
ST5	Janine
ST6	Lina
ST7	Selma
ST8	Karim
ST9	Zahra

Name	**Pseudonym**
TE1	Chloe
TE2	Lisa
TE3	Sara
TE4	Ethan
TE5	Brooke
TE6	James

Protecting participant data is not limited to names. All identifiable data that relates to individuals has been considered in terms of anonymity and pseudonymity, including institutions attended such as placement schools. Where necessary, personally identifiable data has been redacted from transcripts and will not be reported in research dissemination, including in primary data analysis chapters (chapters eight, nine and ten). For example, combinations of information about age, ethnicity, religion etc. can identify participants therefore such personally identifiable data has been redacted where necessary.

For security purposes pseudonyms and codes will be saved on an encrypted online folder for the duration of the study. Data storage is discussed later in this chapter (see section 5.5).

5.4 Risks and Benefits

As argued in the introduction to this chapter (see section 5.1), the ethical stakes of policy claims centred around discourses of 'quality' are high. Addressing gaps in teacher retention and gaps between 'disadvantaged' children and their peers are two supposed outcomes in education. Given the importance of the claims, their conceptualisation and effects matter. This research is then an attempt to challenge policy claims and 'quality' rhetoric. It also seeks to address the "lack of research around the negative effects of mentoring" (Haddock-Millar, 2017: 164), with the intention to provide future benefits to ITTE practitioners, placements and courses.

Potential benefits include developing a deeper understanding of how mentoring can impact on student-teachers in ITTE today, including regarding how mentoring might influence deep-rooted and complex problems such as gaps in teacher retention and attainment. Personal narratives from student-teachers and teacher-educators illuminate how policy operates in practice. Knowledge of lived experiences of participants may inform ITTE courses and mentorship programmes in future. Though careful consideration should be considered to avoid making any false generalisations from this data, it may build towards a larger picture of the present period in terms of ITTE reform.

Benefits to those student-teachers and teacher-educators who took part in the research study include having opportunities to reflect on day-to-day practice, to engage in meaningful conversations with colleagues, to add to wider national and international conversations around ITTE, and to potentially inform future recommendations for education policies and practices.

Risks to participants included potential psychological harm. Discussing mentoring relationships and placements can be emotionally demanding for student-teachers. Likewise, the demands of a teacher-educator's role can include emotional and mental demands. Not only do participants live busy professional lives with multiple roles and responsibilities, they are also increasingly deemed responsible for issues that may be largely out of their control, including teacher recruitment and retention and the wide attainment gaps between 'disadvantaged' children and their peers. My research interviews took place at a time in which ITTE reforms were making changes to everyday practices, a time when teachers were taking

strike action for better pay and working conditions, and a time in which many people in England were feeling the effects of what has been termed a 'cost-of-living' crisis (Calafati et al., 2023). Awareness of the psychological toll and the wellbeing of participants had to be carefully considered.

I initially indicated risks of upset to participants in my access request letter. I had the ability and resources to signpost participants to the university Mental Health and Wellbeing Team, as well as online support options. External support was also available from the charity Education Support. "The more sensitive the data being collected, the more personal the stories being recounted, the more an empathetic listener is required" (Guba and Lincoln, 1981: 140), therefore as well as having knowledge of points of support, additionally sensitivity, awareness and empathy were all important considerations for me as a researcher and interviewer.

Moreover, ethical guidelines advise that researchers "immediately reconsider any actions occurring during the research process that appear to cause emotional or other harm" (BERA, 2024: 20) therefore empathy, responsiveness and flexibility were important factors in ensuring participants were protected from risks as much as possible. For example, it was important that I remained alert to signs of distress and checked in with participants to ensure they were comfortable proceeding or needed to take breaks. Participants had the right to refuse any questions and were reminded prior to and during interviews. They were also reminded that they could opt out of the study at any time, should they choose.

5.5 Data Storage

My research involved primary methods of online questionnaires with student-teachers and semi-structured interviews with student-teachers and teacher-educators. Data collected included responses from questionnaires and transcripts of interviews. Questionnaire responses and recordings of interviews were saved to an encrypted folder on my university Microsoft OneDrive account which only I have access to. This account is further protected by multi-factor authentication adding an additional level of security in line with university safety protocols.

Transcripts were pseudonymised with a pseudonymisation key also saved to this encrypted folder. This key was available in case of any participants choosing to opt out from the project (none chose to opt out). For interviews carried out online, Microsoft Teams was used to record with participants' consent. Video recordings were also saved to OneDrive. All other recordings were audio recordings (recorded with an Olympus D-7000 audio recorder in line with university

ethical guidelines). All audio and video data has been destroyed following transcription in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) principles that personal data only be kept as long as necessary.

I have worked with my doctoral supervisors throughout the data collection and data analysis phases to ensure data collection, transcription and storage remains appropriate and safe.

5.6 Positionality

This research study took place during a period of significant reform to ITTE and focused on one university in England. Attention was given to ensure my approach was "reflexive and situated… mindful of the linguistic, political and cultural" (BERA, 2024: 5) aspects of the research setting. As well as considering how the research was situated, I also consider my own place as situated within the research project. Doing so highlights important issues around power dynamics in research involving participants but situating oneself in research can be problematic and requires further critical reflection is required on how researchers might position themselves, how they might address power dynamics and imbalances, and the extent to which positionality statements can mitigate or overcome such issues in research projects.

In the following section, I reflect on the idea of researcher positionality before offering my own positionality statement. Sections are titled *Navigating Positionality* and *My Positionality.*

5.6.1 Navigating Positionality

> I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order (Foucault, 1972: 17).

Foucault argues a case for avoiding talking about oneself in research. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he portrays his critics' accusations of him to "change yet again, shift your position" (Foucault, 1972: 17). Much later, in a 1984 interview he comments on the many labels he has been ascribed by others, stating how he has been "situated in most of the squares on the political checkerboard" (Foucault, 1994c: 113) giving examples of being referred to by others in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways including as an anarchist, leftist, nihilist, technocrat, Marxist, and anti-Marxist.

It is noteworthy that Foucault again employs the language of games to describe the positions that researchers can take, or, as in this case, in which they can be situated by others. Though using the language of games, it is arguably not a “worn-out” (Nietzsche, 1873: 180) metaphor but an original one. This metaphor of the “political checkboard” (Foucault, 1994c: 113), whereby researchers are placed, or place themselves, nonetheless presents research itself in terms of a game. Foucault’s rejection towards self-definition and his conceptualisation of positionality as a game that is played serves in some way towards problematising and negotiating the idea of researcher positionality.

In terms of positionality, there is a responsibility of the researcher to describe their position in terms of their stance, or a stance that their research embodies. Often a statement on positionality is an expectation (Holmes, 2020), though increasingly this has become not just a recommendation. Now “in many education departments, a declaration of positionality is a prerequisite” (O’Neill, 2024: 2) for doctoral-level study.

O’Neill goes on to discuss the element of uncertainty that can occur in positionality work. Identities are open to change, and the self can be “fractured” (O’Neill, 2024: 3), therefore this can be complex work which invites problematic questions of what we can know and not know of ourselves. As Scheurich suggests, “it is simply not possible to exhaustively name all of the conscious and unconscious baggage” (Scheurich, 1997: 74) we bring, knowingly and unknowingly to research.

Foucault uses the word “situated” (Foucault, 1994c: 113) in relation to being placed on a supposed “political checkerboard” (Foucault, 1994c: 113), but a range of other metaphorical words can ‘situate’ researchers. For example, we may ‘locate’ ourselves in a ‘field’ of research, as if research is a ‘place’ or a ‘position’ or a ‘plot’ of land in which we might stake a claim or plant a flag within this ‘camp’ or among that ‘tribe.’ I have some resistance to “building a polemical fort” (O’Neill, 2024: 3) which can too often serve “unhelpful notions” (Biesta et al., 2011: 4) of merely situating a researcher in terms of paradigms, or in terms of the kinds of data they make use of.

I have chosen to avoid specific language which classes my position within such camps, tribes or paradigms. With that, I also choose to reject the metaphorical trope that research is akin to a war or conquest, with tribes in conflict with other tribes and where an expectation of ‘attack’ and ‘defence’ of ideas is normalised. This is not only because these metaphors are overused or worn-out, but because of the connotations they carry, that research is a battleground that we are required to conquer and establish ourselves within some part of.

This is not an attempt to escape from definition but more to question the purpose, value or power of categorisation. There are categories that simply cannot be escaped from however and I suggest that researchers might be better served otherwise in turning their attentions towards those, rather than selecting the right location on the "political checkboard" (Foucault, 1994c: 113), considering instead the 'game' we all appear to be playing regardless of position.

For example, I have lived, worked and studied in the context of a neoliberal economic framework specific to England in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Born a year after the *Education Reform Act 1988* which brought market-driven approaches to education, I am unable to escape my "situatedness" (O'Neill, 2024: 2) as a neoliberal researcher carrying out neoliberal research in a neoliberal university within a neoliberal society. As Doherty (2007) writes:

> We are all neoliberals now, or at least we live and move in a world whose geography is being refashioned by the evolving project of an imperious neoliberalism. The market state, whose arc of concern, or more precisely, its role, as allocated by this hegemonic discourse, and its mediations and compromises of electoral calculation, has become the recognisable face of contemporary governmental reason (Doherty, 2007: 202).

I do not necessarily advocate for Foucault's call to "have no face" (Foucault, 1972: 17) by resisting definition and self-reflection. Moreover, I recognise the value in bringing attention to autobiographical narratives and characteristics such as gender and race which may allow for a deeper understanding of power dynamics in unequal societies. However, I do understand the need for some resistance to the assumption that we can present the positions of ourselves and the positions of our research. We may never fully eliminate biases despite our best attempts, nor may we fully know our complex and "fractured" (O'Neill, 2024: 3) selves. To draw on Nietzsche again: "We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers" (Nietzsche, 2006: 3).

Instead of attempting to present myself as 'situated' within a 'field' of research, I present instead an attempt to narratively articulate the kinds of historical contexts I have lived and worked within in an attempt to reflect on and present something of the conditions I live and work within and to contemplate the constitution and formation of my own subjectivity as a researcher. I have chosen to do so chronologically, considering my own education, then my teacher training experience, my work as a primary class teacher, and my roles today as I complete my doctoral research. Where appropriate, I have considered changes in policy and politics as this may inform a more cohesive idea of my own subjectivity as well as the research

context by exploring what is “both out there, in the system, the institution; and ‘in here’, in our heads and in our souls” (Ball, 2016: 1050).

I want to express also that, not only are there problems in terms of the extent to which I know myself, there is also the problem of conciseness. As writer and editor of this narrative, there must be things that I have missed out, perhaps consciously or perhaps unconsciously. Despite the problems outlined regarding positionality, I nonetheless consider this important work. What follows is somewhat an attempt to reveal my ‘face’, yet with the intention to reveal something also of “the recognisable face of contemporary governmental reason” (Doherty, 2007: 202).

5.6.2 My Positionality

I was born in 1989 and started school in September 1993, attending a Church of England primary school in Hastings on the south coast of England. My hometown is famous for The Battle of Hastings, as the birthplace of television, and the inspiration for Mugsborough, the fictional setting of Robert Tressell’s *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (2012).

I mostly enjoyed primary school. School days usually consisted of a morning assembly centred around Christian values, with literacy and maths lessons following this, and other lessons taking place in the afternoon. I remember spending time on projects, for example creating a book to share with children in younger years or spending long afternoons working on our own versions of the Bayeux Tapestry in art lessons.

I know now that these memories stand in the shadows of educational reforms which took place across the United Kingdom (before education became a devolved matter for different countries in the UK). Parallels to reforms in ITTE today can be seen in the various reforms that characterised education in England in my early years. The 1980s and 1990s saw the establishment of a National Curriculum, which defined a core base of knowledge children should learn, the introduction of Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), and Ofsted inspections, in which schools were judged and ranked according to their perceived ‘quality.’

Reforms introduced a national system of league tables into education which would have repercussions on educational policies, practices, and politics more broadly. Despite challenge from religious leaders, this was also a time in which the conservative government at the time “had reintroduced a state lottery after a long gap – since 1826” (Cowan, 2024: 658). Therefore, the 1990s was a time of diminishing religious influence (Cowan, 2024) and a time in which the

ethical rationalities of the past were materialising into new cultural formations. The precedence of the ‘game’ in public life and in public services was becoming more apparent.

I left primary school with good SATs results and attended a local secondary school around the start of the new millennium. A new Labour government had taken power a few years before in 1997 bolstered by then Prime Minister Tony Blair’s key message of ‘Education, Education, Education’. I cannot say how much can be put down to the direction of the government of the time or something more like a cultural shift in attitudes, but going to university was an expectation for me, whereas it had not been for my parents. I began studying English Literature at Keele University in 2008, a year marked by a global financial crash, the repercussions of which are being felt still today in terms of global politics and education policy the world over.

Towards the end of my three-year degree, I went to a talk about employment with some course mates. The focus was on what our next steps might be after graduation. I can recall only a few details of the session, but they certainly had an impact on me. I remember distinctly one speaker cautioning against further study with the explanation that postgraduate study for English was now a ‘saturated market.’ I left the session and went to the library with two friends, and we all sat down to apply for postgraduate teacher training courses.

In the end, I rejected the offer to study for a PGCE wanting to spend some time outside of education, having been more-or-less in formal education since the age of four (except for a gap year between sixth form and university). Only a year after leaving university however, I moved to Birmingham where I had a series of jobs including working as a teaching assistant in local primary schools. I became resistant to the idea of becoming a teacher having seen the workloads of the school staff I worked with, but my mind changed after watching an online TED Talk given by Sir Ken Robinson (Robinson, 2006).

That talk made me consider the possibilities of what education could be. Robinson convincingly communicated the idea that education could truly benefit and value all children. I believed that I could be part of the change that could make schools more meaningful for children, help children enjoy learning and promote creativity at the same time. I was also becoming increasingly conscious of the pupil premium and the EEF, who seemed to me to be supporting schools and teachers to better impact on children entitled to this new funding allocation. In my view, to become a teacher would be to work at the forefront of a bold new policy direction guided by research and aimed towards social justice.

I received a place on a School Direct route into ITTE and moved to London, working and training in schools in Tower Hamlets. I gained my PGCE in 2015. That summer, I married my wife Charlotte (we met at Keele University) and in September began teaching my own key stage two class in the same London school I trained in. We left London a year later and moved back to Birmingham where I was a primary school class teacher for five years.

Years into full-time teaching, it was not the TED Talk by Sir Ken Robinson that kept me going, nor can I honestly say it was always the passion for closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. I think, like many teachers (and likely many workers in general) the initial reasons for getting into teaching were replaced by the general patterns and habits of everyday practice. I had become habitualised into the professional life of the teacher. And despite my desires to protect my leisure time, I of course succumbed to the habits that teachers face across the country and broadly around the world – of working late into the evenings, early in the morning, at weekends and during holidays.

I resonate here with Ball's words when he writes:

> We become ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent (Ball, 2003: 220).

My motivation waxed and waned at various points, but I had nonetheless developed these habits of working at all hours. Arguably, even in my leisure time some part of me would still be at work with concerns, worries, or ideas floating between the background and foreground of my mind. Ball adds: "And yet it is not always very clear what is expected" (Ball, 2003: 220) as this ontological insecurity is not exclusive to individual teachers. It is there in policy changes at the national level and the school level, new initiatives and directions, in the aims and strategies of leaders and teachers. It manifests in after-school meetings, conversations with parents at the school gates, the ways in which we interact with the children. 'Quality' often lingers in the underlying rationales along with all its tensions and confusions.

Even my ambitions to study for a part-time Master of Arts (MA) in Education at Birmingham City University were in part due to my ontological insecurity and aspirations "to improve, to be better, to be excellent" (Ball, 2003: 220). My selected optional modules for the MA were 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion' and 'Critical Pedagogies.' I learned broadly about educational inequality, not only in terms of children classed as 'disadvantaged' but how intersections of race, gender and other characteristics can factor into educational achievement

in different ways. I learned about ‘cultural capital’ which was becoming popular in DfE and Ofsted literature and I wrote my dissertation in 2021 around the interpretations and practices of ‘cultural capital’ in terms of how it can impact on children classed as ‘disadvantaged.’ Parts of this work were subsequently published as a book chapter (Allen-Dooley, 2022).

In one way or another, I have been concerned with educational inequalities, particularly for children classed as ‘disadvantaged’ throughout my career as a teacher and into my work as a researcher. This continues into my research focus today with the heart of this study centred on how ‘disadvantaged’ children are presented as a problem in policy and how the problem of educational inequality is perceived, approached and governed.

As well as studying full-time towards a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) in Education, I also worked at Birmingham City University as a graduate research teaching assistant (GRTA) between September 2021 and September 2025. This work involved lecturing and marking within the Primary ITE department, as well as in other areas such as Masters and PG Cert level courses. The metaphorical focus towards the language of games in education stems from working in schools and hearing phrases like ‘We have to play the game.’ Early on as a GRTA, sitting in a meeting with Primary ITE colleagues about the imminent arrival of Ofsted, I also heard such language used. I recognise that this language is not exclusive to education, but its use within educational spaces as justificatory language is of high interest and has informed the theoretical, methodological and ethical groundings of research design.

To draw this positionality statement to a close it is worth mentioning that the term ‘disadvantaged’ as used by the DfE today is a recent definition which has evolved somewhat. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, often when used in the 1990s and 2000s, reference was made to ‘disadvantaged’ areas rather than ‘disadvantaged’ children. This trajectory is important in itself as it demonstrates a shift from disadvantage as a social or political issue towards an individual and personal one. The pupil premium, which was introduced in 2011 (Ofsted, 2012), has in large part developed within this context with a focus on ‘disadvantaged’ children rather than area.

It is the pupil premium (and the ‘disadvantaged’ children it claims to allocate funding towards) project and the parallel emergence of the EEF which most of my professional life sits in the shadows of. But I also have a more personal connection worth explaining. While the pupil premium did not exist when they were younger, both of my parents would qualify for it had they been born today. I can say the same for my wife Charlotte. Our two-year-old daughter

Georgia now qualifies for early years pupil premium support and will qualify for pupil premium funding when she starts school.

The personal and professional stances I have on the pupil premium, and the education of 'disadvantaged' children allow me to see it from multiple angles. With this come the uncomfortable and awkward tensions that exist in the concepts. Both my parents and Charlotte take issue with the categorisation. For example, Charlotte explains that she would not be happy to be classed as 'disadvantaged' due to the label and the stigma that can position individuals as different both internally (by herself) and externally (by wider society).

I recognise too an uncomfortable position Charlotte and I are in as parents. Our daughter attracts pupil premium funding which is supposedly used to support her suggested disadvantages. I know that this funding is often used to plug gaps in school budgets. I do not want her to belong to the mentality of 'the game' where school leaders view 'disadvantaged' children in terms of the money they attract, yet I know this is likely when Georgia starts school.

So the problems continue and we live through them. My ideas, stances and viewpoints are likely to change over time. But for now, this is my position as I may best describe it. You may place me where you like on the "political checkboard" (Foucault, 1994c: 113) should you wish.

This chapter is drawn to a close in the next section.

5.7 Conclusion

Ethical considerations to research practices require not only the professional adherence to core principles, but also a personal commitment to continued reflection on ethics. In the previous section, I have attempted to reflect upon my own stance as a researcher though I recognise the difficulties and complexities this can bring. As Scheurich highlights, I have not been able to exhaustively bring all of my "conscious and unconscious baggage" (Scheurich, 1997: 74) to the fore. However, I have tried to demonstrate the general trends and trajectories that have guided my research focus.

My work as a teaching assistant, teacher and now as a researcher grant me an awareness of rhetoric and discourse around 'quality' and 'mentoring' today. My professional and personal life centre around the concept of 'disadvantage' and the assumptions, theories and practices that emerge from these ideas. I am passionate to continuing learning more and hopeful to

make positive change to current ideas and approaches. I believe I am in a unique position to undertake this research.

I do so with a personal commitment to empathy and compassion when working with participants at multiple levels of ITTE practice. Relatedly, I took an approach that favoured flexibility over methodological purity. Many participants either could not or did not want to attend group interviews. Individual interviews were offered throughout the research process. An awareness of the busy lives of student-teachers and teacher-educators was essential, and I aimed to consider the requirements and wishes of participants, agreeing to meet for interviews online rather than face-to-face. This was often favoured by participants, and I would rather build open and trusting relationships than push people to interview in-person to suit my research methodology.

Considerations of power dynamics were also important while attempting to develop "openness, emotional engagement, and the development of a potentially long-term trusting relationship" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 643). From a student-teachers' perspective, I could be viewed as a fellow student given my PhD status, but I could also be seen as a member of staff given my GRTA position. I also recognise personal characteristics which could place me in a position of privilege, for example in research interviews. As a white, cisgender male who has received a high level of education, has no known disabilities, and who has had a Christian upbringing, I recognise my position in terms of advantages I have in a society which can grant privileges to people like me, those which may be unseen or unknown or which I may otherwise take for granted.

Such power dynamics and interpersonal perceptions remained considerations throughout the study and part of my rationale for incorporating board games into interviews was to highlight metaphorical language of games used by practitioners but also in part to build a connection between myself and my participants. While this was intended as a way to break down perceived barriers and in part rebalance power dynamics, this did not necessarily have the intended effect in all cases. As will be demonstrated, not all interview participants recognised metaphors of games, for example 'playing the game'. However, I remain open to addressing power imbalances in research while understanding this can be difficult and complex work, especially when researchers can be "unconscious" (Scheurich, 1997: 74) of their own understandings, perceptions and potential biases.

In terms of power dynamics, I also had to consider how my position as a GRTA and PhD student made me both 'insider' and 'outsider' to Primary ITE staff at the university. Floyd and

Arthur (2012) outline some of the difficulties that can occur in 'insider' research due to “ongoing personal and professional relationships with participants, insider knowledge, conflicting professional and researcher roles, and anonymity” (Floyd and Arthur, 2012: 172). While it's noted that 'insider' research can also have benefits including more willingness to participate and share information from participants, it was important to establish and maintain trust at every stage. Trust is built when actions meet words, so developing trust is also an ongoing process which lies at the heart of developing relationships with participants and peers.

Bringing this chapter to a close, I now turn to following chapters which take the form of primary and secondary data analysis.

Chapter six explores historical justifications for current ITTE policy reforms around ‘quality’, ‘mentoring’ and ‘disadvantage’ in England. Chapter seven then approaches a recent policy document, the *ITT Market Review Report* in further depth with a focus on the language of games and competition and its relevance to ‘quality’. These two chapters consist of my secondary data analysis and will explore the first of my research questions: *What are the historical and political justifications for a logic of competition and inequality in education and how does this relate to justifications for the quality of teaching in ITTE today?*

Following this, chapters eight, nine and ten explore my primary data. Comments from questionnaires are explored at the start of chapter eight, after which chapters mostly explore the analysis of interview transcripts with student-teachers and teacher-educators. These three chapters explore significant metaphorical language used by practitioners. A range of metaphors are discussed, though each chapter predominantly centres around ‘sinking and swimming’ (chapter eight), ‘playing the game’ (chapter nine), and, ‘levelling the playing field’ (chapter ten).

Chapter eleven serves as a discussion which aims to bring these analysis chapters together cohesively through a discussion of research questions as well as a reflection on findings, criticisms and implications for the study. Finally, chapter twelve offers a conclusion, in which closing remarks are given.

Chapter 6: The Descent of Quality

6.1 Introduction

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Reverend Dr. Andrew Bell published *An Experiment in Education* which appeared to outline a novel method for educating large numbers of pupils:

> The great advantage of the system is, that you have a teacher and an assistant for every class, who have not yet begun their career of pleasure, ambition, or interest; who have no other occupation, no other pursuit, nothing to employ their minds, but this single object. Add to this, that your ascendency and dominion over the young mind is complete, and easily maintained; that these children can only do what is assigned them to do, and succeed the better in teaching others, that they themselves know no more than what is level to the capacities of their pupils, and therefore lose no time in teaching what is beyond the comprehension of their scholars, which is often no small impediment and hindrance of education (Bell, 1797: 25-26).

Bell proceeds to describe the management structure of his ideal classroom, in which his all-male pupils have "always an instructor at his elbow, who is, in the first instance, answerable for his progress" (Bell, 1797: 26). This monitor, of a similar age to the pupil but selected for their perceived mastery of the learning material, is "answerable" to "the assistant", usually a child a few years older, "then the teacher, then the schoolmaster, and last of all the superintendent, whose scrutinising eye must pervade the whole system, whose active mind must give it energy, and whose unbiased judgment must maintain the general order and harmony" (Bell, 1797: 26).

Bell's 'Madras System' was named for its original use within the Madras Male Orphan Asylum, "an institution constructed for the children of fallen British soldiers" (Rahmani, 2014: 25) in Madras (now Chennai), India. Bell was hired by the East India Company in 1789 and returned to England in 1797, bringing his 'experiment' with him as a proposed method for educating large groups of children (Rahmani, 2014). *An Experiment in Education* (1797), his published account of the Madras system, did not initially attract much attention (Tschurenev, 2008: 247) until some years later when schoolmaster Joseph Lancaster initiated a large-scale model for the elementary education of poor children in London.

Bell promotes his approach as one in which educators will "lose no time" (Bell, 1797: 26) due to its efficiency and control over monitors and pupils. Lancaster was attracted to the method for this suggested efficiency and economy. In his *Improvements in Education* (1805), Lancaster writes:

> In education nothing can be more important than economy of time, even when we have a reasonable prospect of a good portion of it at our disposal; but it is most peculiarly necessary in primary schools, and in the instruction of the poor (Lancaster, 1805: 31).

Lancaster suggested the benefits of the system to include children being more active in their learning, "instead of sitting idle" by "employing some of the senior boys to inspect the slates of others" (Lancaster, 1805: 51), which were in turn overlooked by the "principal teacher" (Lancaster, 1805: 51). In addition, he believed that those supervising could also benefit academically in their role, suggesting that through repetition they might "rivet" (Lancaster, 1805: 51) knowledge into learners' minds as well as their own, concluding: "thus, *he* cannot possibly teach the class without improving *himself* at the same time" (Lancaster, 1805: 51, original emphasis).

The legacy of Lancaster's schools was significant. On first opening his school in 1798, the number of pupils attending was around "ninety to a hundred and twenty" with parents charged fourpence per week (Lancaster, 1805: 1) for their child's education. For children whose parents could not afford to pay Lancaster offered free education, numbering more than thirty "on the book as *free scholars*" (Lancaster, 1805: 1). He solicited subscriptions from charitable donors, which by his second year had doubled revenue, as had the number of free scholars in attendance. By 1804 he had increased total student numbers "from three hundred and fifty to seven hundred boys" (Lancaster, 1805: 6) and sought to increase numbers again to a thousand students.

The ambitious growth of Lancaster's schools through charitable subscriptions, coupled with the economic efficiency ethic of Bell's 'Madras System' would eventually influence school structures globally, including in England, France, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, parts of North and South America and West Africa (Tschurenev, 2008: 248). What was originally termed the 'Madras System' became more commonly known throughout the world as the 'monitorial system of education', though it can also be referred to as the 'Lancasterian system', or the 'Bell-Lancaster Method' after its experimental founders.

6.2 The Monitorial System of Education

For all the connections between Bell and Lancaster, evidence from a biography of Bell from later in the nineteenth century indicates that the two men "hated each other with a perfect hatred" and "taught their followers to cultivate a mutual detestation" (Meiklejohn, 1881: 40) to each other. While both had a shared interest in the monitorial system that they had promoted and developed, conflict arose in their opposing ideas around the correct approach towards the training of teachers. Bell's biography includes an early meeting between the two in which Lancaster argues that teachers should "know something of the nature and growth of the mind and soul upon which he had to operate" (Meiklejohn, 1881: 40). Bell retorts, "Nothing was ever so burlesque!" (Meiklejohn, 1881: 40) and criticises Lancaster's idea as "forming his teachers by lectures on the passions" (Meiklejohn, 1881: 40).

Bell suggests that Lancaster's proposal is comical or absurd while also intimating that emotions and feelings ('the passions') are undesirable and unnecessary in teaching practices. Bell is then quoted as saying:

> It is by attending the school, seeing what is going on there, and taking a share in the office of tuition, that teachers are to be formed, and not by lectures and abstract instruction (Meiklejohn, 1881: 43).

Here we have then very similar methods of an efficient, economical, and hierarchical education system, yet with two distinct outlooks in terms of teacher preparation. Bell values "ascendency and dominion" (Bell, 1797: 25) over young minds, including monitors and pupils. He also appears to see no value in teachers learning anything beyond the processes and procedures of schools, favouring a model whereby teachers learn how to teach only through imitation via Bell's system as it is applied in his schools. Bell perceived the system as a perfect representation of order and obedience, evident in his use of military metaphors that liken his teachers and monitors to his "sergeants and corporals" (Meiklejohn, 1881: 48).

On the other hand, Lancaster saw the potential for education as something which might transform the social order. Criticisms towards such ideas are recounted in a twentieth-century biography about Lancaster. In Lancaster's time, debates centred around the "danger of educating the poor" (Kaestle, 1973: 2) with concerns that poor citizens would be made aware of "their lowly station", read "seditious" (Kaestle, 1973: 2) literature, or otherwise cause disruption to the status quo, which was deemed "unnecessary and unwise in a properly hierarchical society" (Kaestle, 1973: 2). Additional criticism of Lancaster was directed towards

his religious beliefs as a Quaker and the associated proposition that religion might be taught in schools in a “nonsectarian” manner (Kaestle, 1973: 47).

Bell and Lancaster were opposed in their views on teacher education, social mobility, and religion. Another notable difference between Bell and Lancaster is that Bell was funded by the East India Company, while Lancaster’s funding came from charitable donations. Despite the immense size, income and power of the East India Company, little was spared for Bell’s Madras asylum. For Lancaster, charitable donations allowed for many children to be granted free places in his school, but it was not a constant source of income.

Despite many differences and a “perfect hatred” (Meiklejohn, 1881: 40) for one another, their similarities lie in these economic restrictions. Both valued the monitorial system for its efficiency and economy. As previously mentioned, Lancaster stresses the importance of “economy of time” (Lancaster, 1805: 31). His desire for expediency is not only about the temporal but relates to his limited funding. Later in *Improvements in Education,* he demonstrates how one might save as much money on classroom resources as possible in a section entitled: “A Method of teaching to spell and read, whereby one Book will serve instead of Six Hundred Books” (Lancaster, 1805: 55). Cost-saving and efficiency are seemingly never far from Lancaster’s mind.

The justifications for a monitorial system of education appear to centre around Bell and Lancaster’s shared need to be as cost-effective as possible in their approaches. Both Bell and Lancaster agreed that education, and particularly the recruitment and training of teachers, could be done with very little financial cost. They also agreed that this economic efficiency could be best achieved through a system of hierarchical observation, supervision and inspection.

There was initially little resistance to the method itself, which required the work of large numbers of unpaid children. In fact, for some time it was highly praised and largely unquestioned. There appeared to be agreement across the political spectrum on the success of the system in terms of providing a means for educating large numbers of pupils and it was seen to correspond to a scientific discourse and rationale of the time, whereby a systematic, mechanical, efficient approach mirrored the prevailing spirit of the Industrial Revolution.

While the monitorial system can be viewed as “an example *par excellence* of early nineteenth-century educators’ faith in a science of education” (Kaestle, 1973: 46, original emphasis) it is important to consider the formulation of this ‘science’. Bell outlines a systematic and

hierarchical method which desires control of each stratum. His “scrutinising eye” (Bell, 1797: 26) pervades as a form of “surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of a family over his household and goods” (Foucault, 1991: 92). Under this patriarchal “scrutinising eye” (Bell, 1797: 26), children are subjected to “only do what is assigned them to do” (Bell, 1797: 26). In other words, Bell promotes and legitimises his system by endorsing its power of surveillance and control, “ascendency and dominion over the young mind” (Bell, 1797: 26).

Bell leans on military metaphors to describe his monitors and pupils (Meiklejohn, 1881) which may be expected given that his first monitorial classroom was Egmore Redoubt, a “deserted fort” (Meiklejohn, 1881: 24) repurposed into the ‘asylum’ in Madras. But Bell continued this trend some years later in setting up other schools, for example at the Royal Military Asylum at Chelsea, and it is further suggested that Bell’s preoccupation with authority and order came from his background in the church as a preacher (Meiklejohn, 1881).

Lancaster also draws on metaphorical language. But while Bell employs military metaphors relating teachers and monitors to “sergeants and corporals” (Meiklejohn, 1881: 48), Lancaster leans on the language of industry. He justifies a monitorial system as beneficial for monitors as well as pupils, arguing that through teaching content that they already knew, monitors could “rivet” (Lancaster, 1805: 51) knowledge into the pupil’s mind as well as their own therefore “improving” (Lancaster, 1805: 51) himself and the pupil at the same time. The use of the word ‘rivet’ is of its industrial times and conjures the action of fastening together with a bolt. Lancaster uses technical language which mirrors the technological and industrial trends of the early nineteenth century.

Both Bell and Lancaster come from different backgrounds, share different outlooks on social justice and teacher training, and seemingly use separate metaphors in their language. However, these metaphors – Bell’s, which compares children to military subordinates; Lancaster’s, which likens children to industrial material to be exploited and constructed with – share common associations that objectify children for the purposes of justifying their monitorial method of education. Both Bell and Lancaster present children as their subjects with these metaphors, categorising children as of low rank and deficient. Such metaphors then legitimise practices that ‘improve’ children through a hierarchical system which effectively subcategorises and ranks children within these set parameters under the economic and scientific rationalities of the times.

Both metaphors serve an aesthetic and poetic function by making cultural associations and connections that express and articulate specific ideas to their audiences. Yet they are not

"merely rhetorical or decorative, but also constitutive of reality" (Ng, 2018: 215). Acknowledgement of their ideological character is required. The logics and rationalities which underscored the science of the times was influenced by traditions of the Church and military that Bell represents as well as the industrial and technological developments that Lancaster represents. This is a science situated within a complex and diffuse network of power guided by the norms of a society that values surveillance and control, mechanisms and systems, industry and service.

Therefore, the monitorial system is legitimised by an ascribed "status of sciences" (Foucault, 1982: 777) situated in the values of an industrial society and economy. This society required the correct training of children through a method of inexpensively forming its ordered and compliant teachers. Such "dividing practices" (Foucault, 1982: 777) of a hierarchical system form the subjectivities and identities of its members, for example the monitor who improves both the class and "*himself* at the same time" (Lancaster, 1805: 51, original emphasis).

Justifications for the system include the governmental rationality of the "introduction of economy into political practice" (Foucault, 1991: 92). Further justifications may also be found in the very language that divides and categorises, that ranks and objectifies. And it is this metaphorical language that rhetorically "reproduces or transforms the relations of power" (Mottier, 2008: 188) and further serves (aesthetically, poetically, economically, and 'scientifically') this legitimation in these times. In other words, the metaphorical language used by both Lancaster and Bell maintains and sustains the economic and scientific basis which undergirds the purposes of education of the period, upholding a political and economic rationality that effectively justifies a collective subjectification of children for their own 'improvement.'

6.3 Preventing Society's Ills

> The pauper children maintained in Union workhouses are dependent, not as a consequence of their errors, but of their misfortunes. They have not necessarily contracted any of the taint of pauperism. They are orphans, or deserted children, or bastards, or children of idiots, or of cripples, or felons, or they are resident in the workhouse with their parents, who seek a brief refuge there (Kay, 1839: 3).

This is the introductory paragraph of *The Training of Pauper Children*, published around forty years after Joseph Lancaster opened his first school. The report was published by the Poor

Law commissioners in their fourth annual report and written by the assistant Poor Law commissioner then named James Kay, but who would later be better known as James Kay-Shuttleworth after marrying his wife Janet Shuttleworth in 1842.

A series of poor laws had existed for centuries prior to the establishment of a royal commission in 1832 to report on their administration, resulting in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 or the "New Poor Law" (Steer, 2020: 40). The Act led to local parishes being grouped into unions which were governed by a board of guardians who were then responsible for administering relief to the poor, commonly referred to as 'paupers' at the time. Larger union workhouses were formed as a result of these developments, which also saw the introduction of "schooling in workhouses and other poor law establishments for the first time" (Steer, 2020: 42).

The New Poor Law categorised the poor into two groups, "the needy and the non-needy" (Besley et al., 2004: 245). Among the needy were two further subcategories, the *deserving*, "those who are needy through no fault of their own", and the *undeserving*, who are classed as needy "because of some vice such as drinking or sloth" (Besley et al., 2004: 246). Making such distinctions was a crucial part of Poor Law reform and sent a "potent signal to the poor of a change from the more generous" (Besley et al., 2004: 246) prior poor laws.

The opening line of Kay's *The Training of Pauper Children* conceptualises pauper children in workhouses as situated by misfortune rather than "a consequence of their errors" (Kay, 1839: 3). With this, Kay demonstrates that these children are classed as the needy and deserving poor therefore justifying his focus towards offering them support. Apparent in Kay's language is a focus on risk and hazard with the choice of words like 'consequence' and 'misfortunes.' However, it is his specific employment of language related to health and disease that is most prominent following this opening sentence.

In the sentence that follows, Kay describes pauper children as those who "have not necessarily contracted any of the taint of pauperism" (Kay, 1839: 3). Prior to working for the Poor Law Commission, Kay had worked as a doctor, so perhaps it is unsurprising that his lexicon includes words like 'contracted' which suggests that pauperism might be an infection that one can acquire. After this however, Kay makes his point explicit by stating that:

> Education is to be regarded as one of the most important means of eradicating the germs of pauperism from the rising generation, and of securing in the minds and in the morals of the people the best protection for the institutions of society (Kay, 1839: 3-4).

Kay's use of language clearly reflects his stance, and it seems likely that this is a deliberate rhetorical choice to employ metaphorical language to suggest that pauperism is a disease which poses risks to society. Kay's conceptualisation makes use of a range of related metaphorical vocabulary which strengthens his rhetorical emphasis through repetition. He suggests that pauperism is an infectious disease, the "germs" of which need "eradicating" in order to offer "protection" (Kay, 1839: 3-4) to social institutions which it threatens.

Children, in Kay's metaphorical construct are both saveable and worth saving. Their 'misfortune' has placed them in a perilous position in close proximity to infection. As doctor by profession, Kay presents education as a prescription or a vaccination stating that it is "one of the most important means" (Kay, 1839: 3) of preventing the 'disease' of pauperism manifesting in pauper children. Metaphors are described as "building-blocks" (Mottier, 2008: 192) of narratives and discourses. With Kay's repeated use of metaphors of germs and disease, as well as employing several related metaphors of eradication and protection, Kay builds something of a metaphorical justificatory framework. It not only describes pauperism as a disease but clearly conceptualises education as the cure.

Therefore, the metaphorical construction of this conceptualisation continues when Kay suggests that children require "moral sustenance" (Kay, 1839: 3) in order to become independent, likening moral education as a nourishing and restorative measure. He also describes education as "an agent for the removal of pauperism" (Kay, 1839: 4) drawing on imagery of the administration of medicine or surgery, again associating education with medical, restorative properties. This language validates and justifies education as a necessary procedure or intervention which can heal the individual and, by association, heal a society of its poverty or pauperism.

The idea of education as the prevention of disease goes beyond Kay's own word choices. David Stow, founder and honorary secretary of the Glasgow Educational Society, whose schools Kay would visit along with other "model schools" (Kay, 1839: 18) of Scotland such as the Edinburgh Sessional School, uses similar language in *The Training System of Education*, a guide for training teachers based on the work undertaken at the Normal Seminary, Glasgow. Stow published his original text in 1846. Its success led to multiple reprints, with its eleventh edition published in 1859. In this edition, Stow begins with an epigraph immediately after the title page:

"TRAIN UP A CHILD IN THE WAY HE SHOULD GO."

“PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE.”
“THE CHILD IS FATHER TO THE MAN.”
(Stow, 1859: ii).

The aesthetic and poetic function of metaphors is evident here, with the medical motto on ‘prevention’ here sandwiched between a biblical proverb in the first line and a line of poetry from William Wordsworth in the last. Stow gives emphasis and suggests significance here in the epigraph. Then, throughout his text he continues to repeat the line “prevention is better than cure” (Stow, 1859: v, 26, 33, 83) weaving the medical metaphor throughout that describes pauperism as a disease and education as the cure.

These medical metaphors are therefore frequent and common in Kay and Stow’s works. Such metaphors mark a difference between the decades prior, when Bell and Lancaster were proposing their monitorial system. Bell and Lancaster suggest children as docile, malleable and compliant with Bell comparing his subordinates to “sergeants and corporals” (Meiklejohn, 1881: 48) and Lancaster suggesting that one could “rivet” (Lancaster, 1805: 51) knowledge to children’s minds. The medical metaphors of Kay and Stow are representative of a potential shift from such mechanistic mindsets and methods.

This shift in metaphorical choice and its underpinning ideology is perhaps indicative of the period. Education reform was emerging alongside public health reform, including improvements to sanitation. Therefore, this medical language serves as a common legitimisation for the public good. In addition, despite Bell and Lancaster’s aspirations for a pliant system of teachers, assistants, monitors and pupils, the working classes did not simply submit to authoritative control. Events like the Swing Riots and Luddite rebellion signalled a wider movement of protest against the conditions of labour for the working classes. These movements were provoked by rising anger towards new technologies and automated machinery which were seen as threats to the livelihoods of working-class people (Navickas, 2005).

The Luddite movement had its own metaphorical basis in the personification of ‘General Ludd’, its devised mythical leader named after the alleged “machine-breaker” (Navickas, 2005: 284) Ned Ludd. There was then a marked shift away from the industrial rationality of prior decades. Therefore, it was perhaps necessary for proponents of educational reform like Kay and Stow to move away from the unpopular mechanistic language, metaphors and mentalities of Bell and Lancaster towards a new language to justify reform, a language that would be seemingly more humane while also aligning with the wider zeitgeist signalled by rebellion and reform

movements of the early nineteenth century. There is then a strategic element to Kay and Stow's employment of metaphor, which attempts to both delegitimise the old order of Bell and Lancaster and further legitimise and strengthen their own ideas for reform.

One of Kay's proposals coincides with such a departure from Bell and Lancaster. While teacher training colleges emerged to meet growing demand for teachers from the 1820s onwards there was a notable lack of suitable candidates for teacher training (Robinson, 2006). It is in *The Training of Pauper Children* that Kay outlines a solution. Rather than utilising "monitors to assist the superior master and his assistant teachers" (Kay, 1839: 30) he argues

> that certain of the more intelligent scholars (especially orphans), who exhibited considerable zeal and interest, and whose attainments were sufficiently advanced, were selected from the rest to be trained to the occupation of teachers (Kay, 1839: 30).

Kay's "pupil-teachers" (Kay, 1839: 30) as he named them, were distinct from monitors. They were to be renumerated in line with their "acquired skill" (Kay, 1839: 30). The benefits to the pupil-teachers are stressed by Kay: "a modified form of apprenticeship" in which a "a certificate of competence" (Kay, 1839: 30) could be given on completion. Kay had proposed a solution to address concerns about education "quality" (Robinson, 2006: 21) in the expanding school systems of the early nineteenth century while also addressing the lack of suitable candidates for teacher training.

This shift from a monitorial system to a pupil-teacher method of teacher training, marked by changing attitudes reflected in changing metaphors, was not a complete reform of the entire system, however. The monitorial system "was not overthrown; it was phased out" (Kaestle, 1973: 45). Shifting from the former method did not make schools necessarily less "mechanistic and superficial", nor more "humane and individual" (Kaestle, 1973: 45). Despite the rhetoric, for the most part an industrial, mechanical and hierarchical system remained, underscored by a rationality that valued economy and efficiency, order and compliance, and industry and subordination.

> Elementary school pupils continued to recite, copy, and practice; they learned primarily from books, not nature; and they sat in neat rows of desks bolted to the floor (Kaestle, 1973: 45).

Despite traces of the monitorial system remaining, there were some shifting changes towards the view of the purposes of education. The medical metaphors of Kay and Stow seemingly were the "building-blocks" (Mottier, 2008: 192) of a conceptual idea that would envisage education as an *intervention*, something that could heal and cure, indeed something that could support poor children from the "taint of pauperism" (Kay, 1839: 3), offer "the best protection for the institutions of society" (Kay, 1839: 4), and target other such related ills of society at the time.

6.4 Reform, The State and The Market

As the previous section has demonstrated, the educational reforms that began in the 1840s introduced the pupil-teacher model of teacher training. This was also a time in which Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) began to inspect schools and monitor pupil-teachers annually (Robinson, 2006). By the late 1880s, the pupil-teacher system had evolved into a centre model in which pupil-teachers would spend half of their time training in school-based practices and the other half in specially designated centres "staffed by the cream of the elementary teaching profession, where they would receive an academic and professional training" (Robinson, 2006: 22).

The pupil-teacher system continued for some decades later; "by the end of the 1920s however, a new college-based primacy was firmly in place" (Gardner, 1993: 22). Following movements to college- or university-based approaches to teacher training, "the pupil-teacher system was abolished" (Robinson, 2006: 23). Further reform followed. The 'Beveridge Report' (1942) and *Education Act 1944* signalled reform to the management of the state and "marked the abolition of an uncertificated route into the teaching profession, the ultimate vision being an all-graduate profession" (Robinson, 2006: 23).

Education reforms from 1944 also included the establishment of free and compulsory schooling, raised the school leaving age to 14, abolished the 'marriage bar' which until then had allowed schools to disqualify women "by reason only of marriage" (Education Act, 1944). It also established the 'primary' (formerly 'elementary') stage of education. Reforms came at a time marked by the high ambitions of looking forwards into a post-war society. The metaphor of conquering "five giants on the road of reconstruction" (Beveridge, 1942: 6) demonstrates the ambition as well as the scale of the perceived problems: want, disease, ignorance, squalor, and idleness.

Both Gardner (1993) and Robinson (2006) describe fluctuating opinions on the dominance of either university-based or school-based training over the twentieth century. Criticisms of the former, that it is too “remote, limited, or overly-theoretical” (Gardner, 1993: 22) arose in the 1960s and early 1990s, while criticisms of the latter, of its apprenticeship focus and “prescriptive approach” (Robinson, 2006: 24) can be found in the 1920s and 1970s. By the 1990s, a pendulum swing towards the merits of school-based models was at the heart of proposals for “cost-effective training” (Allen, 1994: 3), justified as a way “to increase the part played by schools in providing teacher training” (Allen, 1994: 3).

It was also a time marked by a swing from the state reforms of the post-war era to a new market-driven approach. The shift in focus towards school-based teacher training was one element of many reforms stemming from the *Education Reform Act 1988*, after which followed the introduction of a national curriculum, as well as Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), and the establishment of the Teacher Training Agency who could determine qualified teacher status (QTS) and grant accreditation to training institutions. Criticism of the separation of “teacher education from other university courses” (Allen, 1994: 24) followed. At the same time, “primary headteachers were opposed for taking on such a responsibility” (Allen, 1994: 4) of teacher training, desiring minimal involvement with course design and quality monitoring. Furthermore, some headteachers were concerned about “tying up their best teachers in training rather than teaching” (Allen, 1994: 4).

In addition to the introduction of the Teacher Training Agency, Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMIs) were replaced by The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in 1992. This was a significant time of change in which the combination of the school monitoring and inspection from Ofsted and the requirement for the publication of SATs results created a new environment and professional culture. Performance, ranking and comparison of schools was part of this new culture with its creation of league tables subsequently embedding a competitive logic into national education systems.

It is at this time that the word ‘quality’ begins to occur with more frequency in education policies and discourses. In Ofsted’s early days, the commissioned report *A Focus on Quality* was published by consultants Coopers and Lybrand. It advised and informed Ofsted’s inspection handbook (Ofsted, 1994) demonstrating the shift towards this significant word ‘quality’, its meaning and its power. But always underlying ‘quality’ is its competition logic, and the effects it can produce are highly problematic.

In a section of its annual report entitled ‘Media Interest in Inspection’ Ofsted bemoan the journalistic reporting on the new inspection system where media reports focus only on those schools receiving “‘top marks’ or ‘a caning’” (Ofsted, 1994: 12) in inspection reports. These phrases may not just be media sensationalism as Ofsted might imply, however. Considering their metaphorical basis can expose a hidden truth in the overarching competitive drive for ‘quality’, that league tables and Ofsted rankings not only present but define the ‘best’ and the ‘worst’. This focus on the binary distinctions of supposed high quality and poor quality are worth consideration as more than media spin. While exaggerations, they are also the expression of responses to a ranking system that categorises by competitively pitting schools against one another. That is to say that the competitive ‘quality’ logic itself creates the very conditions for these media reports, and their binary language of best and worst, to flourish.

With this emerging discourse of quality, the idea of ‘mentoring’ follows - originally as a way to improve schools and teacher quality in general but crossing over into ITTE with increasing frequency (Allen, 1994). The subsequent focus on ‘disadvantage’ would emerge later, but with a predominant emphasis on ‘disadvantaged areas’ rather than ‘disadvantaged children’. This changing focus is discussed in further depth later in this thesis (chapter ten). Nevertheless, the emergence of these keywords which make up and legitimise the premise that quality teaching is the most important in-school factor for ‘disadvantaged’ children has roots in the teacher training systems of prior centuries, whereby the education of poor children and the correct training of teachers were matters of efficiency, expediency, hierarchical control, surveillance and economy – values that have been tactically and strategically legitimised through rhetorical techniques, including through the power of metaphor as outlined in this chapter.

It is also notable that around this time some influential ideas in education begin to employ a language of games, such as in Barber’s *The Learning Game* (1996) which has been subsequently described as “highly influential in the formation of education policy” (Stannard and Huxford, 2007: 3) in a recount published a decade later in a book emulating Barber’s work, *The Literacy Game* (2007). This language of games, in relation to education since the *Education Reform Act 1988*, appears to characterise the policy direction towards ‘quality’ in recent years.

It is a language that captures a relative, competitive and comparative notion of quality whereby quality is determined via comparison, categorisation and distinction. The establishment of Ofsted inspections arguably aligns with a similar surveillance mentality of the monitorial system and subsequent systems, while the introduction of SATs enables a ranking system of

league tables and comparison amongst schools. The ‘game’ metaphor can demarcate these market reforms and their neoliberal spirit of “competition and inequality” (Davies, 2014: 310). These traces of language and underlying ideologies will continue to be explored in the following chapter. Here I bring this chapter to a close with a final point.

At the start of this section, I drew on secondary historical texts by Robinson (2006) and Gardner (1993). There is some notable conflict in Robinson and Gardner’s interpretations of their historical findings. While both seem to agree on the details, they make separate and critically opposed judgements. Gardner cautions against researchers invoking the pupil-teacher approach in critiques of more recent apprenticeship models of teacher training as evident today, stating that “the characteristics of that essentially nineteenth century system belong to a particular time, which has passed” (Gardner, 1993: 23). Gardner suggests that the pupil-teacher approach is anachronistic, therefore strictly belongs to a time “which has passed” (Gardner, 1993: 23). On the other hand, Robinson argues that later models “retained residual elements of the apprenticeship model of training embodied in the original pupil-teacher system” (Robinson, 2006: 23). Both were writing before Michael Gove would begin a series of reforms in ITTE with a conceptualisation of teaching as a craft,

> best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman. Watching others, and being rigorously observed yourself as you develop, is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom (Gove, 2010).

While the nineteenth century has certainly ended, I argue that there are undoubtedly “residual elements” (Robinson, 2006: 13) and traces of its ideologies in ITTE reforms today. In fact, Gove’s words are not too dissimilar to those of the architect of the monitorial system of education, the Reverend Dr. Andrew Bell:

> It is by attending the school, seeing what is going on there, and taking a share in the office of tuition, that teachers are to be formed, and not by lectures and abstract instruction (Meiklejohn, 1881: 43).

Dean argues that it is vital for researchers to remain “anti-anachronistic” (Dean, 1999: 44) and reminds us that such underlying ideologies are not merely words that belong to histories that no longer matter. They are as much of the present moment as of history. They reveal something of the “descent” (Foucault, 1988: 145) of quality from Bell to Gove, centuries apart from one another.

In the next chapter, I continue my secondary data analysis by focusing on ITTE reforms of today in regard to the common metaphorical conceptualisation of education as a game. While these reforms are of their present moment, such residual elements and traces from prior centuries remain and continue to inform the discussion.

Chapter 7: Taking Chances

7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I have described the historical emergence of a particular logic of competition in initial teacher training and education (ITTE) and education more broadly today. In this chapter, I continue to develop an understanding of these logics which underpin policies, shape conducts, and play out in practices. This chapter therefore continues to explore the research question: *What are the historical and political justifications for a logic of competition and inequality in education and how does this relate to justifications for the quality of teaching in ITTE today?*

As outlined in chapter two, the Department for Education (DfE) has published a range of policy reform documents for ITTE in recent years. A 'golden thread' narrative has been posed (DfE, 2022a) as a way to bring cohesion and coherence to policy from 2019 to present. As part of this 'golden thread', ITTE providers are encouraged to develop their curriculum with strict alignment and adherence to a knowledge and evidence base specified by the DfE for its supposed quality and methodological rigour (see sections 2.2 and 2.3).

The focus of this chapter is largely based on the *ITT Market Review Report* (ITTMRR). This document is significant for its language use and its arguments for market reform, therefore the analysis follows from the previous chapter where the market-driven reforms of 1988 have been outlined, as has the early emergence of a 'quality' discourse. The word 'quality' features 161 times in this 56-page document, while the word 'mentor' features 143 times making both words highly significant within the ITTMRR.

However, it is not my intention, nor within the scope of this research study, to analyse each of these words in context. It is not only out of scope for the sheer frequency of words, but a potentially limiting task. Rather than attempting to merely decipher meaning from the ITTMRR, I am concerned with the ways in which "language is played" (Foucault, 2018: 13). Foucault advocates for investigating effects of language and not only meaning. It is such effects of the kinds of language that produce and reproduce discourses and practices that I turn my attention in this chapter.

As argued in earlier chapters, discourses around 'quality' in education can be traced to political reform agendas which seek to improve education standards in terms of international rankings in ILSAs such as PISA. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, some of these traces can be found earlier with the establishment of Ofsted and SATs tests following the *Education*

Reform Act 1988 which generated a series of national league tables that appeared to distinguish school quality (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017). It is not the intention of this chapter to focus only on the high frequency words like 'quality' and 'mentor' but to consider the language used to define, frame and justify such reforms. I intend to demonstrate in this chapter that such language is rooted in a neoliberal ideology of "competition and inequality" (Davies, 2014: 310) and of the "competition of individuals being classified in relation to one another" (Foucault, 1977: 162).

This chapter employs methods of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to focus on specific word choices made in the ITTMRR. As in previous chapters, focus is on metaphorical language where appropriate, so elements of metaphor analysis (MA) will also be used. In this chapter, I consider how metaphors can become "building-blocks of discourse" (Mottier, 2008: 192) and serve to construct ideas and concepts. This may not always be necessarily conscious, but can have rhetorical effects nonetheless. My predominant focus is language which relates to games and competitions.

The chosen words and phrases under investigation are also repeated throughout the ITTMRR. Therefore, like 'quality' and 'mentor' there is a possible rhetorical effect in their repetition and persistence. They can appear "prefabricated" (Orwell, 1960: 156) which may allow them to fade into the background as quotidian, normalised and unchallenged assumptions (Jones and Wareing, 1999). It is necessary to "make visible what precisely is visible" (Foucault, 2018: 12) and foreground these ideas to reveal and question "that which was already there" (Foucault, 1988: 142).

Three examples have been chosen for their use of games-related language and for their repetition. These are the terms 'world-class', 'lead' and 'left to chance'. Their analysis makes up the remaining sections of the chapter before a conclusion which brings together the previous chapter and the current chapter. Ideas around taking 'chances', being in the 'lead', and having 'world-class' status are three examples in which the language of games and competition surfaces and intersects within discourses of 'quality'. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the ways in which these words, ideas and logics play out in a wider neoliberal discourse of education as a global competition.

This is therefore a choice to focus, as Foucault suggests, on the tactics, strategies, stakes and objectives. As highlighted previously (see section 3.3.3), Foucault also proposed an analysis "en terme de règle et de hasard" (Foucault: 1994b: 542), with 'hasard' (or hazard) a central focus of this chapter. Not only is this a study of competition and of striving to be better, but

also risk, threat, precarity, jeopardy, and danger – in other words, the hazards of taking chances.

7.2 "A truly world-class system of initial teacher preparation"

In this section, I focus on the three occasions in the ITTMRR in which the term 'world-class' is used. This term is not exclusive to the ITTMRR. For example, 'world-class' appears several times in the policy paper which introduces the idea of a 'golden thread' (see section 2.2) of "high-quality evidence" (DfE, 2022a: 5) that underpins changes to teacher development, including reforms in ITTE. In fact, the term 'world-class' appears in the title of that policy paper: *Delivering World-Class Teacher Development*.

Its use in the ITTMRR is explored in this section, given the significance of the market review to ITTE reforms specifically. As demonstrated, this is a policy which uses the words 'quality' and 'mentor' a significantly high number of times. Its shift "towards a new market" (DfE, 2021b: 26) in ITTE further marks the significance of the policy document in that it coincides with a neoliberal rationality that seeks to reinvent institutions and activities in "a 'market-like' way" (Davies, 2014: 310).

Such a mentality implies market freedoms as a method for achieving 'quality' or high standards. In many cases, the state remains active (while seemingly at a distance) in market-like governance under a normative ethical and political rationality of "competitive activity, that is, the production of inequality" which is viewed "positively under neoliberalism, as a non-socialist principle for society in general, through which value and scientific knowledge can best be pursued" (Davies, 2014: 310).

To consider "the production of inequality" (Davies, 2014: 310) via a logic of competition, I focus here on the term 'world-class' to move beyond solely considering meaning but to also consider the production of identities, and the functional "aspects of metaphors such as the action that they perform" (Mottier, 2008: 190) in policy discourses. While 'world-class' is mentioned far less than 'quality' and 'mentor' in the ITTMRR, it is nonetheless a powerful term that feeds into the language of games and the larger metaphorical conceptualisation of education as a game.

This language of games implies a global competition in which education reform is situated. 'World-class' is a compound adjective consisting of 'world' and 'class' stylised with a hyphen to indicate the compound nature of the term. To be 'world-class' is to be "one of the best that there are of that type in the world" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, world-class entry) and

synonyms include ‘amazing’ and ‘first-rate.’ Given its implications of global prominence, the political nature of the term must be considered, especially given the close relation between the rise of ILSAs such as PISA and the emergence of a “discourse of quality” (Ball, 2016: 1051) in recent education reform discourses.

To consider an education system that is ‘world-class’ is therefore in part an indication of what is meant when policy discusses ‘quality’. At a global level it is rooted in an imperative which continues to guide policy trajectories today. It is the imperative “to do better in order to achieve national results that are comparable to those which are the highest performing” (Mutton and Burn, 2024: 220). In other words, a ‘world-class’ education system may be one which seeks to achieve higher ranks on league tables generated by ILSAs in the international competition – the geopolitical ‘game’ – of education systems today.

This can certainly be interpreted from the word alone, but how is it presented in context in the ITTMRR and what “issues of meaning, identity and power” (Mottier, 2008: 188) does it imply? Here I present the first of three uses of the term ‘world-class’ in the ITTMRR. It is written towards the beginning of the report’s foreword written by Chair of the review, Ian Bauckham.

> Our aspiration is to create a truly world-class system of initial teacher preparation that is grounded in robust and up-to-date evidence, which equips teachers with the professional knowledge and expertise that they need to begin their careers and prepares them for their early career induction, once qualified (DfE, 2021b: 3).

This sentence effectively introduces the ITTMRR, setting out a rationale for an ITTE system informed by “robust” (DfE, 2021b: 3) evidence. Associations are made between “a truly world-class system” (DfE, 2021b: 3) and the kinds of evidence that student-teachers are expected to learn from. Like the ‘golden thread’ narrative which would follow the ITTMRR a year later (DfE, 2022a), quality is determined in this paragraph in terms of a supposedly “robust” (DfE, 2021b: 3) evidence base of selected education research which supports development into later career stages.

Throughout the main text of the ITTMRR, a series of recommendations are given. These 14 recommendations include that providers should develop an evidence-based curriculum “as a condition of accreditation” (DfE, 2021b: 14), that prospective providers should go through a “new, rigorous accreditation process” (DfE, 2021b: 29), and that the DfE and Ofsted should

“explore how involvement in ITT might be included in the education inspection framework” (DfE, 2021b: 32).

In a final section, the 14 recommendations of the ITTMRR are concluded. They are described as “the next logical steps” (DfE, 2021b: 34) and “complete the reform journey set in train through the Carter Review in 2015 and continued in DfE’s 2019 teacher recruitment and retention strategy” (DfE, 2021b: 34). The conclusion to the main text of the ITTMRR then states:

> Taken together, these recommendations will build on our strengths to ensure that the training our teachers receive at the start of their professional life is truly world-class (DfE, 2021b: 35).

This term ‘world-class’ therefore bookends the main text of the ITTMRR. Its place as the first and last idea carries significance. It is the first impression for readers, the hook that draws them in. Revisiting the term in the final line recalls the reader to the first while also making a final impression. It strategically structures the text by closing a loop, highlighting and promoting the importance of being ‘world-class’ as an overarching coherent idea in the ITTMRR.

The third and final use of the term is towards the end of Annex B, a draft version of proposed ‘Quality Requirements’. It is situated in a section entitled ‘Quality assurance’ which details “robust arrangements for monitoring” that providers “must develop” (DfE, 2021b: 50). These include “quality and fidelity of all aspects of curriculum delivery… quality of mentoring work of all types and levels… quality of regular in-course assessment and feedback… [and] quality, reliability, and validity of end-of-course summative assessment” (DfE, 2021b: 50).

> There must be clear systems in place for reporting and taking action to address any shortfalls in quality in a prompt way, to protect the entitlement of trainees to world-class training (DfE, 2021b: 50).

Attention to ‘quality’ concerns are highly apparent. But this final presentation of the term ‘world-class’ invites the question of who this ‘quality’ is for. Earlier in the ITTMRR, a student-teacher is likened to a customer. Conceptualising ITTE as a ‘market’ reveals the reality of the marketisation of ITTE. Many student-teachers are fee-paying and so the customer label is accurate in that sense. But in describing “the ITT customer journey” (DfE, 2021b: 10) and in the above example, which requires providers give “prompt” protections to student-teachers’ entitlement, there appears to be a rationale in which speed and haste are prioritised. It can

reveal something of the values of efficiency and economy inherent in ITTE policy. It is also worth querying here how quality is framed towards the “trainees” or “customer” (DfE, 2021b: 10) with a distinct absence of reference to ‘children’ or ‘pupils.’

For all the mentions of the word ‘quality’ in the ITTMRR, we may then ask: who is quality intended to serve? The term ‘world-class’ is outward facing. It is about competing and succeeding on the ‘world stage’ and employs the language of international and geopolitical success, therefore carrying the underlying logic of competition that is never far – though may be hidden beneath the surface – from ‘quality’ claims in policy. Lyotard highlights the risk to performativity in systems “designed to tackle world competition” (Lyotard, 1984: 48) and if quality remains only a perception of a position on a global leaderboard, there is a real threat to realising and promoting education as something meaningful and purposeful for teachers and children alike.

7.3 “The training and expertise of mentors and lead mentors”

The predominant focus in the last section was on the term ‘world-class’ as it is used and presented in the ITTMRR. This section focuses on how the word ‘lead’ is used, the connotations it can have in relations to games and competition as well as how it relates to the interplay between meaning, power, and the “constitution of identity” (Mottier, 2008: 192) in ITTE policy discourses.

Following on from the previous section which explored how ‘world-class’ can be used in the ITTMRR, it is noteworthy that a similar term has been used and repeated in the Carter Review (2015). Given the Carter Review’s influence as the starting point for the “reform journey” (DfE, 2021b: 34) that the ITTMRR concludes, it is well worth exploring. However, while the ITTMRR repeats the term ‘world-class’, the Carter Review repeats the term ‘world-leading’. This is distinct between the two documents in that the ITTMRR does not use ‘world-leading’ nor does the Carter Review use ‘world-class’. The phrases are exclusive to their separate policy documents.

Each use of ‘world-leading’ in the Carter Review is in relation to its eighth recommendation, that “ITT partnerships should make more systematic use of wider expertise outside university departments of education” (Carter, 2015: 9). The rationale given for this is that many universities are "home to world-leading research and assessment organisations” (Carter, 2015: 9). The recommendation from the Carter Review does not seem to manifest in the ITTMRR and universities are rarely mentioned. One instance discusses the value when

"university and school experiences are tightly integrated" (DfE, 2021b: 15) but this is mainly used to introduce the argument that providers should ensure "close alignment between the intention and details of the curriculum and the way in which they are delivered and practised in school" (DfE, 2021b: 16).

As mentioned earlier (see section 2.2), this is not the only recommendation from the Carter Review that goes unfulfilled. For example, Carter's first recommendation calls for a "framework of core content for ITT" (Carter, 2015: 49). But Carter adds: "We feel it is critical that a framework is developed by the sector, rather than by central government" (Carter, 2015: 49). While "assessed and endorsed" (DfE, 2019a: 2) by the EEF, in actuality the *ITT Core Content Framework* is produced by the DfE – despite Carter's "critical" (Carter, 2015: 49) suggestion to the contrary. Not only does this situate the DfE as a centralised authority and "curator" (Brooks, 2023: 44) of appropriate content, with alignment between the CCF, ITTMRR and the supposed 'golden thread' of "high-quality evidence" (DfE, 2022a: 5), it effectively gives the DfE authority over what is deemed appropriate content (and what is not), how evidence should be judged (and how it should not), and the research methods and approaches that matter in ITTE (and those that do not).

Essentially, the DfE take the 'lead' – yet they assume a leadership that is selective and narrow. Selected recommendations of the Carter Review are unfulfilled. Furthermore, there appears to be no clear justification for why this first recommendation of Carter's (that a core content framework *not* be developed by central government) is ignored. A leadership that does not listen, take feedback on board, or justify its choices in the face of recommendations to the contrary is likely to be an ineffective one.

To invoke leadership and the root word 'lead' implies a relationship – that is to say that 'leading' involves 'following'. Next, I consider some of the ways 'lead' is used in the ITTMRR to conceptualise a new kind of identity, role and relationship. It is a term seemingly exclusive to ITTE – the 'lead mentor'. This term is explored and explained somewhat in the ITTMRR. As a new term and role with clearly important implications for quality of mentoring and quality of teaching, it is important to consider its conceptualisation, particularly as outlined in the section entitled 'Lead mentors.' It is also important to consider the interplay between the two words which make up the role, 'lead' and 'mentor.'

'Lead' has a variety of meanings and may be open to wide interpretation or considered conceptually vague. In games and competitions, being in the lead suggests being in first place. It therefore may imply rank or position. To lead also means to "manage or control" and "show

the way" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, lead entry). There is an inherent suggestion of pedagogy in connotations of 'lead' and 'mentor' in combination. Yet clarity on what a lead mentor might teach to a mentor is difficult to find in the ITTMRR.

Lead mentors are instead defined by what they will do rather than what or how they might teach. The role is indicated as more a technical or managerial position than a pedagogical one, which suggests a possible tension between the words 'lead' and 'mentor.' According to the ITTMRR, lead mentors have "wider mentor oversight" (DfE, 2021b: 11). While they "train", they also "deploy mentors" (DfE, 2021b: 19). Theirs is a role of "support and supervision" as well as "design and delivery" (DfE, 2021b: 19). A lead mentor's adherence to "evidence-based content" (DfE, 2021b: 19) is cited in terms of the importance of lead mentors undertaking national professional qualification (NPQ) training. Again, the motif of the 'golden thread' is apparent in the importance of 'evidence' at every career stage (DfE, 2022a).

However, in all of these descriptions of what a lead mentor will do, there is no mention of the word 'mentor' as a verb. This is to say that in the entire conceptualisation of a significant new role named 'lead mentor', and within a 56-page document in which the word 'mentor' is used 143 times, there is no mention of who they mentor, how they mentor, or whether they even mentor at all. It would appear, given the involvement of deployment, supervision, and "oversight" (DfE, 2021b: 11) in the role, a lead mentor is perhaps not really a 'mentor' in the traditional sense at all. Given what appears to be a hierarchical model of oversight rather than a clearly defined mentoring relationship, a more fitting word for the role may even be 'monitor' or that which Ball calls "the new hero of educational reform" (Ball, 2003: 219), a 'manager'.

7.4 "This important element of training must not be left to chance"

This section focuses on the word 'chance' which is used four separate times in the ITTMRR, each time within the phrase 'left to chance.' This is then an analysis of its specific use in this phrase 'left to chance.' As with previous sections, this is a conscious choice to focus on the language of games – language that can serve as "building-blocks" (Mottier, 2008: 192) that can construct a larger conceptual discourse in which education operates within an underlying logic of competition.

'Chance' relates to 'luck', 'fortune' and 'fate' and can suggest high stakes and risk. But its use in the phrase 'left to chance' is uncommon in DfE policy. In the ITTMRR, 'left to chance' is repeated four times and in different ways. These four uses will be described and considered

in terms of the power relations at play within the policy text and the effects that such language can produce or reproduce.

In a section of the ITTMRR entitled ‘The centrality of the trainee curriculum’, the phrase ‘left to chance’ is used twice. The first mention comes in the form of the argument that primary school trainee teachers must be taught about systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). The ITTMRR states that student-teachers must be taught about the “evidence for the effectiveness” (DfE, 2021b: 13) of this approach to teaching reading. The exclusivity of this approach is also highlighted as it advises that “time is not used” (DfE, 2021b: 13) in teaching other approaches. The paragraph ends with the decisive sentence: “Learning to teach reading using SSP cannot be left to chance in the design of primary ITT programmes” (DfE, 2021b: 13).

“Effectiveness” (DfE, 2021b: 13) is highlighted here, as is expediency and economy of time in the suggestion that “time is not used” (DfE, 2021b: 13) on other approaches. These values are not dissimilar to the values of Bell and Lancaster from centuries prior. As described in the previous chapter (see section 6.1) Bell promotes the monitorial system as that which will “lose no time in teaching” (Bell, 1797: 25) and Lancaster values the method because “in education nothing can be more important than economy of time” (Lancaster, 1805: 31). Given that learning to teach reading “cannot be left to chance” (DfE, 2021b: 13) in ITTE, we may wonder why speed, expedience and economy of time necessarily amount to “effectiveness” (DfE, 2021b: 13).

The ITTMRR justifies the importance of this suggested approach with the rationale: “because learning to read is so foundational and indispensable for future success” (DfE, 2021b: 13). It is hard to disagree with this statement but given that humans have learned to read for far longer than the SSP method has been designed, conceptualised, and disseminated, we may question why this specific programme has been promoted here. As the proportion of children that enjoy reading for pleasure continues to decline year on year (Clark et al., 2025), we must also query why economy of time matters so much here, as well as query what kind of measures underscore how “effectiveness” and “future success” (DfE, 2021b: 13) are conceptualised. The language of necessity is evident in the ITTMRR whereby this approach to reading via the SSP method is not presented “as a choice that has been made but rather is assumed and taken for granted as the only one available” (Dahlberg et al., 1999: 2).

Effectiveness, expediency and economy of time may therefore be questioned, not necessarily for their scientific claims but rather for the power relations they reveal. This language of necessity portrays a ‘science’ which employs a kind of “narrative as its authority” (Lyotard,

1984: 29). We might wonder who this narrative, that “teaching reading using SSP cannot be left to chance” (DfE, 2021b: 13) serves. Such a focus on the tactics and strategies of speed and efficiency might help students to learn to read technically and practically, yet it is unlikely to promote reading as an enjoyable habit for children but rather as a kind of performance that they become part of, part of the comparisons, examinations, league tables and ranking systems of education today. Again, risks of performativity emerge when educational priorities are “designed to tackle world competition” (Lyotard, 1984: 48) at speed, rather than aiming to develop reading as a lifelong and enjoyable habit in children.

The phrase ‘left to chance’ is used on the subsequent page of the ITTMRR, in a paragraph stressing the necessity “that all teachers learn the expectations and behaviours which are appropriate to the profession” (DfE, 2021b: 14). Specific reference is made to Part 2 of the Teachers’ Standards, which the CCF advises ITTE providers teach to trainees. They add: “This important element of training must not be left to chance and so must also be explicitly planned in the curriculum that accredited providers design” (DfE, 2021b: 14).

The third use of the phrase ‘left to chance’ comes in the preceding section of the ITTMRR, entitled ‘Intensifying the impact of practice placements.’ The section highlights the importance of “structured and sequenced practice environments” (DfE, 2021b: 15) for trainees. Keeping cohesion and consistency with the DfE-approved evidence-base, these practice environments require tight integration “so that trainees can directly see and experience the link between theory and practice” (DfE, 2021b: 15). A recommendation is given for all accredited providers to “ensure close alignment” (DfE, 2021b: 16) between the ITTE curriculum and how it is “delivered and practised in school” (DfE, 2021b: 16). They add: “It should not be acceptable for the effective delivery of any part of the planned curriculum to be left to chance” (DfE, 2021b: 16).

With the second and third occurrence of the phrase ‘left to chance’, the ITTMRR moves away from methods and approaches to reading and phonics and towards the behaviours, conduct and actions of teachers. These two sections highlight the immense scale of reforms to ITTE. In addition to a collection of ‘Learn that…’ and ‘Learn how to…’ statements to craft an ITTE curriculum around, these sections suggest that ITTE staff also need to work towards teaching the “expectations and behaviours” (DfE, 2021b: 14) of the Teachers’ Standards as well as develop “practice environments” (DfE, 2021b: 15) which are structured, sequenced and bridge perceived gaps in theory and practice.

Not only is this a tremendous task for ITTE providers, it demonstrates a significant focus of reform which is not only about defining core content but also shaping the conduct and behaviours of student-teachers. As suggested previously (see section 2.3), one significant 'Learn that…' statement from the CCF is related to the "commonly held belief" (Riordan, 2022: 4) that:

> High-quality teaching has a long-term positive effect on pupils' life chances, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (DfE, 2019a: 9; DfE, 2024a: 11).

Therefore, the ambitions of ITTE reforms are not exclusive to 'core content' but rather more extensively it is the "technical means for the shaping and reshaping of conduct" (Dean, 1999: 18). It is not only methods, approaches and theories that are undergoing reform but also the expectations, behaviours and beliefs of a new professional community. This is to be achieved through a simultaneous shaping of the conduct of teacher-educators, mentors, lead mentors through new requirements for accreditation and for quality assurance. It is a reform which touches multiple levels of ITTE, including school-based practices through a hierarchical formation of roles, relationships and identities, that is "the capillary functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977: 198).

The final use of the phrase 'left to chance' is found in the 'Conclusion' section of the main text of the ITTMRR. In outlining the benefits of reforms, a positive outcome is suggested:

> strong and stable partnerships which are consistent and navigable for schools, where no aspect of the delivery of the ITT curriculum is left to chance, where roles are clear and accountability is strong (DfE, 2021b: 35).

This is the final example which uses the phrase 'left to chance' and surrounded by several positive adjectives connoting durability such as 'stable', 'consistent' and 'strong' (used twice in the same sentence here). Such ambitions will continue to be explored and investigated in following chapters.

Four key considerations have been outlined in this section: the teaching of reading through SSP, the learning of expectations and behaviours, delivery of practice placements, and strong and stable partnerships. It is suggested that none of these things can be 'left to chance' suggesting that they cannot be left to fate, fortune or happenstance.

The next chapter begins to explore how such ideas in policy can play out in practice, how these words and phrases can emerge in the realities of everyday ITTE placements and in the

lives of student-teachers today. For example, this idea of leaving something to 'chance' and the related language of 'luck' will inform parts of the following chapter.

I draw this chapter to a close in the next section and consider some of the interrelated ideas that have emerged in these secondary data analysis chapters.

7.5 Conclusion

In drawing this chapter to a close, I reflect upon the analysis undertaken across the previous chapter and the current chapter. Both chapters have centred around my first research question as outlined previously: What are the historical and political conditions that constitute a logic of competition and inequality in ITTE and education today? My answer to this question forms part of chapter eleven, following the next three chapters of primary data analysis. Rather than attempt to answer the question here prematurely, I relate instead some of the emerging thematic ideas in discourses centred around 'quality' – the "descent" (Foucault, 1988: 145) of these ideas and the ways that they play out in significant ITTE policy today.

In the early nineteenth century, Bell and Lancaster promoted a model of education – the monitorial system. It had the benefit of teaching large groups of children and was considered an efficient means of educating with Bell proposing that educators would "lose no time" (Bell, 1797: 26) in teaching, while Lancaster was equally encouraged by its efficiency and "economy of time" (Lancaster, 1805: 31). Centuries later, the efficiency ethic can be found in education policy, specifically that which promotes market reform to ITTE and has been the focus of this chapter, the ITTMRR. It can be found in the use of words like "prompt" (DfE, 2021b: 50) in describing addressing shortfalls in quality to protect student-teachers' entitlements to 'world-class' ITTE. It emerges in the promotion of SSP where it is deemed highly important that "time is not used" (DfE, 2021b: 13) on other supposedly inferior programmes.

Part of the suggested efficiency and expediency of Bell and Lancaster's monitorial system is in its hierarchical structure whereby monitoring, surveillance and control are seen as positive values. After the transition towards pupil-teacher methods and training centres, elements of monitoring continued in the role of HMIs, later being replaced by Ofsted in the early 1990s. Bell's "scrutinising eye" (Bell, 1797: 26), which oversees the workings of the mechanistic monitorial system is still somewhat evident in modern systems. The operations of observation, quality assurance and monitoring today are certainly different, but a logic of scrutiny and of the presence (perceived or real) of watchful eyes still makes up a significant part of the

education system today, with an increase in this kind of quality monitoring infiltrating ITTE provision.

“Oversight” (DfE, 2021b: 11) is not only by one ‘eye’ however, but many. And the hierarchies today which oversee or are overseen have an underlying notion of monitorial oversight. Correspondence can be found in the way that hierarchies are conceptualised in the ITTMRR as in the monitorial system. The lead mentor oversees the mentor and the mentor oversees the trainee, not unlike how the assistant oversees the monitor and the monitor oversees the pupil. These hierarchical systems have many more strata, ranks and divisions still.

For example, ITTE providers are overseen by Ofsted and the DfE. There is an element of a “panoptic mechanism” (Foucault, 1977: 200) that controls via hierarchical surveillance here. Yet, where the monitorial system has its constant “scrutinising eye” (Bell, 1797: 26), oversight in ITTE may also be “irregular” (Foucault, 1977: 207), yet the threat exists and pervades the system, nonetheless. And it is important to recall here that the stakes are increasingly high with the risks of de-accreditation (Mutton and Burn, 2024) for institutions that do not comply.

Simply put, traces of the monitorial system still exist today. Yet, it appears that a new epoch has emerged since the 1990s. It has roots in those older systems described, but it is nonetheless distinctive. This new system is marked by a market ideology which considers competition as a means for developing quality at multiple levels. DfE policy argues for a ‘world-class’ system that can compete on an international stage. New leadership roles are established such as ‘lead mentor’ which are presented like monitors or managers for quality reform. Specific elements of a new ecosystem of ITTE are deemed too important to be ‘left to chance’ legitimising new positions and practices. New identities are formed within a panoptic configuration of hierarchical relations, yet also with uncertainty via a consistent and irregular threat of inspection, observation and hierarchical oversight.

These words and phrases under discussion – ‘world-class’, ‘lead’, and ‘left to chance’ – all draw on the vocabulary of games and act as “building-blocks” (Mottier, 2008: 192) of discourses of quality, metaphors of games, and an underlying logic of competition in ITTE today. But with this logic of competition that guides reform, what really happens when such words, metaphors and logics play out in practice? What are the risks and who faces them? What are the effects of these policy discourses? In other words, given the rhetorical claims of policy what are now the effects of taking chances – or merely taking part – in ITTE today?

Chapter 8: Sinking, Swimming and Surviving in ITTE

8.1 Introduction

The following chapter begins to explore findings from my primary data collection and analysis. Primary data methods used included online questionnaires with student-teachers and semi-structured interviews with student-teachers and teacher-educators. This chapter explores qualitative findings of online questionnaires as well as the analysis of interviews. Further analysis of these interviews continues into chapter nine and ten. These chapters are based on metaphors relating to survival (chapter eight), compliance and performance (chapter nine) and social justice (chapter ten). While distinct from one another, there are thematic overlaps which will be signalled where appropriate and explored further in the discussion that follows (chapter eleven).

This chapter begins with findings from online questionnaires with student-teachers before moving into an analysis of interviews. Online questionnaire participants have been anonymised while interview participant names have been pseudonymised. This difference is indicated with reference to 'questionnaire participants' abbreviated to QP and a number indicating their response number. For example, questionnaire participant 39 is quoted first and referenced as QP39 in this chapter. Interview participant responses (which are more personal and contextual) are referred to by given pseudonyms. Chapter five includes a list of the pseudonyms given for each interview participant (see section 5.3.4).

As described in chapter four (see section 4.3.1), interviews involved drawing out elements of conversational and informal language used by practitioners when talking about education quality and the premise that 'quality' of teaching can support children classed as 'disadvantaged.' I specifically sought to bring the metaphorical language of games under interrogation. Key considerations included phrases like 'playing the game' in reference to inspection, quality assurance and assessment and 'levelling the playing field' in reference to redressing socioeconomic and educational disadvantages.

However, as this chapter demonstrates these were not the only metaphorical elements of language which emerged in questionnaires and interviews. Occasionally new metaphors were noticed and explored within interviews. Others were not noticed until the analysis stage. This chapter is an attempt to represent some of these findings and explore other language formulations, including metaphorical conceptualisations which can describe and justify quality teaching and quality mentoring practices in ITTE.

Language under consideration includes the representation of ITTE as a high-stakes 'make or break' or 'sink or swim' environment. It explores how mentors might support – or hinder or exacerbate – student-teachers' learning and development. Related figurative, metaphorical and rhetorical language is considered, such as the notion of being 'out of one's depth' or the need to 'jump through hoops' in order to succeed in ITTE. Lastly, I draw on the recurring idea of 'luck' and its place in the relative, comparative and competitive logic that 'quality' reforms are situated within.

8.2 Making and Breaking

Comments provided by questionnaire respondents offer contextual and personal explorations of the variability of student-teacher experiences with mentors and on placements. Consider the following:

> The mentors can make or break not only your placement but your whole experience on your PGCE. I have been lucky but some students have had a very rough time. There [are] not consistent expectations given to teachers about our role in the classroom and what we need the class teacher to do. My teacher was only informed the day before she was having a student. She doesn't have time to read the handbook. No training or information was given to her - not even a meeting at school with the lead mentor before we arrive to discuss how they are to best support us. It's too inconsistent across schools as to what support we are given and some students are put off entirely, some even drop out of the course based on how they are treated by the class teacher on their first placement (QP39, 2024).

This student-teacher's comment is certainly an important one to reflect on when considering quality of mentoring in ITTE today. The comment begins with the idea that school-based mentors can "make or break" one's experience on a placement and on an ITTE course more broadly. This idea of 'making' or 'breaking' corresponds with mentoring literature (e.g. Furlong and Maynard, 1995) and also coincides with ideas in more recent research and policy claims of the importance of mentors (DfE, 2020).

What is also clear from the comment is a perceived lack of consistency. Expectations of student-teachers and class-based mentors are described as "not consistent" and support for student-teachers is labelled "too inconsistent across schools." The comment is also significant

as it relates this noted inconsistency with issues around course completion rates and retention: “Some students are put off entirely, some even drop out of the course.”

I have not presented the student-teacher’s full comment here (see Appendix A for full comments) but it is perhaps a signal of this student-teacher’s frustrations that they chose to express their thoughts extensively here. To summarise, the commenter goes on to offer recommendations including the university assigning a university tutor (UT) earlier, prior communication from the UT to lead mentors and class-based mentors to share information about the student-teacher and what mentors can expect from students, and an open communication (email or phone call) between a school and university. The comment then ends with the following:

> Too much of a PGCE is down to the discretion of a class teacher which isn’t being monitored closely enough by [the university]. Yes we must learn in practice but the current system is allowing ITT’s [sic] to be put off entirely – too many tears caused by poor mentors! (QP39, 2024)

Considering that the questionnaire was intended to explore quality of mentoring in ITTE, this comment stands as a damning indictment of the current system. Before moving on to present commentary from other participants however, it is worth noting that despite descriptions of inconsistency, lack of time and training, and even tears of fellow student-teachers, this student-teacher actually hints at the idea that their experience may have been a positive one: “I have been lucky”, they suggest. This is not the only reference made to ‘luck’ by participants as shall be demonstrated and I will return to this participant’s perception of being “lucky” later in this chapter (see section 8.3).

As well as luck, the idea of mentors ‘making’ or ‘breaking’ a student-teacher’s experience on ITTE courses introduce the comment cited above. These words are of interest, particularly as they can relate to quality as a comparative idea. In other words, we could say that some student-teachers are ‘lucky’ to be placed with a good mentor, and therefore by comparison others are unlucky. Likewise, it can be said that some mentors will ‘make’ and others will ‘break’ the student-teacher’s experience.

This comparative perception of quality is not limited to comparisons between student-teachers’ experiences on ITTE courses as a whole, but also through experiences for an individual student-teacher from one placement to the next. In fact, there appears to be some commonality throughout comments given. Consider the following three comments:

> I had a brilliant experience with my school mentor in my first year as I am on the part-time route. This year however – I am not getting the same enthusiasm – possibly due to staff morale (QP6, 2023).

> Although I had a vary [sic] good experience on my most recent placement, I had a lot of catching up to do as I started behind after a poor second year placement (QP59, 2024).

> My last placement was awful and I wasn't supported so I have to repeat a placement because of it… I'm just lucky that I have a great mentor and I'm at a good school now (QP48, 2024).

There is a certain familiarity or resemblance across the three statements here. The conjunctions "however" and "although" highlight the comparative and contrasting descriptions within the first two comments. Adjectives such as "good" versus "poor" in the second comment, and "awful" versus "great" in the last show a clear distinction between placements and experiences. And in the final comment, the word "lucky" again highlights a particular way in which some student-teachers interpret this contrast for themselves.

Some of the distinctions described between placements and in the language used more broadly could be classed in terms of polarity. For example, 'make' and 'break', 'good' and 'poor', and 'awful' and 'great' are notable in terms of being polar opposites to one another. One final comment to close this section makes this point explicitly:

> My first placement – My answers would have been strongly agree for all, she was amazing! My current placement is polar opposite (QP43, 2024).

While examples given prior to this comment imply polarised descriptions, this comment makes explicit that the student-teacher perceives two separate placements – and evaluates two separate mentors – as poles apart from one another. In these examples, student-teachers present comparatively different mentors and placements via polarised language suggesting binary oppositions. This idea will inform the following sections of this chapter. But, in closing this section, it is important to clarify a few points.

There appear to be trends, patterns of thought and language, and certain commonalities in these descriptions of different placement experiences from student-teachers. By presenting these similar descriptions I am not attempting to claim some kind of universal experience or narrative underlying student-teachers' experiences on placements or across ITTE courses. All experiences will be different: contextual and personal. But there is an evident pattern of

comparative, contrastive language corresponding with and often framing student-teacher views of mentor and placement quality. Such shared language can frame identities and constitute subjectivities within "a network of dynamic relations" (Rose, 1991: x) in ITTE.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that all data presented thus far have been from comments given by questionnaire respondents. As such, any language seemingly related to games, competition, or comparison is unprompted. In other words, I have not instigated or encouraged this language with the use or mention of games as in interviews. I will return to questionnaire comments in this chapter, but the next section will begin to consider data from interviews which will allow for greater depth in exploring unique narratives from student-teachers, as well as views from teacher-educators too.

8.2.1 "What can I do to make it so I'm not out of my depth?" (Sophie's Story)

As suggested, the phrase 'make or break' demonstrates binary distinctions between perceptions of student-teachers' ITTE placement and mentor experiences. Synonymous phrases include: 'win or lose', 'do or die', and 'sink or swim.' Such descriptions suggest success or failure in high-stakes, all-or-nothing environments. These phrases may correlate to ideas about games and competition, for example 'make or break' and 'win or lose.' But at a more extreme end they reference life and death, for example 'do or die' and 'sink or swim.' In other words, this language is not only limited to metaphors of games and competition but may include metaphors of survival too.

This section will begin to explore such survival metaphors, beginning with an interview participant's response to a question asked about reasons for leaving ITTE courses. Student-teacher Sophie and I were discussing policy claims, including claims that improvements to mentoring could help to support teacher retention. During this, Sophie was asked: "Were there ever any times when you thought 'this isn't for me, and I don't see myself doing teaching'?"

In her response, Sophie recalls a time early on in her first placement in which she was asked to take responsibility for covering the class as her colleagues were unavailable:

> We had two children [with] very complex needs and they asked me if I wouldn't mind covering because the person that normally does it had to go out… I found that really difficult just working with these two and I wasn't really given like, I was like, "What do I do with them?" and they were like, "There's some resources in the cupboard over there. Just have a look and grab whatever you want" even though I only had like five minutes. I didn't

> really have the chance to work it out. I didn't really know the kids that well and I think, 'oh', that, I was a bit out of my comfort zone there (Sophie, 2023).

Here Sophie details a scenario in which she is asked to cover with little notice. In fact, she describes "like five minutes," which, as she states is not enough time to "have the chance to work it out." Interestingly, much of her reflection is presented as personal rather than environmental. In other words, she appears to internalise social and political factors such as lack of resources like teaching staff and resultant lack of time and consideration for her as a student and as a learner. This internalisation can be seen in the final line of the quotation above: "I was a bit out of my comfort zone." But it can be seen again following this as Sophie reflects further on her experience.

> So, it's one of those. But then I've reflected on that and thought, 'Oh, what can I do better?' And I've tried to get to know those kids a bit better and I've asked questions about what I need to do with them and shadowed. I think you'll get those times when you feel out of your depth and you're like 'I don't want to do this.' But you've got to look at why, what can I do to make it so I'm not out of my depth? (Sophie, 2023).

Note here the repeated analogy of swimming in the final two sentences. Sophie gives the example of being "out of your depth" followed by "out of my depth." This figurative phrasing relates to her earlier point about feeling out of her comfort zone. And again, there is a repeated sense of internalisation as Sophie considers how she might learn from the situation. She asks, "What can I do better?" in the first sentence here, and in the last: "What can I do to make it so I'm not out of my depth?" It may be argued that Sophie demonstrates a high level of resilience in her response to a difficult situation. In reflecting she presents her experience as an opportunity for learning and development, adding:

> If you're passionate about it and you enjoy it, you've got to kind of just embrace it and think, 'OK. I can change that. I can make it not so daunting' (Sophie, 2023).

When asked whether a level of mentor support had an impact on this scenario, Sophie replied:

> Yeah, because my mentor was asking like, "How did you get on with that?" because she was out of the classroom. I said I was a bit out of my depth and stuff, and as a result of that she said, "Well, why don't we make it so that when the normal TA [teaching assistant] is back you can do some shadowing with her?" And then we kind of had those answers and then she helped me think of ways that I could change that as well so that was nice.

> And it was good that I've got that relationship with her that I could go and say that and not feel like I'm going to get in trouble for being out of my depth (Sophie, 2023).

Once again, Sophie summarises her difficult experience of covering a class by herself as "being out of my depth." This repeated swimming metaphor appears to act as a shorthand here for being placed in a highly stressful and difficult environment early on in a placement with very little support given. This is framed as a learning experience by Sophie. As this final section of Sophie's narrative demonstrates, her mentor also supports this framing by asking Sophie, "How did you get on with that?" When Sophie explains her feelings of being out of her depth, the reply involves what Sophie should do next as a result, in this case "shadowing" the teaching assistant. Sophie ultimately presents a positive learning experience facilitated through dialogue with her mentor. As a result, both student-teacher and mentor arrive at "answers" for the problem. Additionally, Sophie describes how her mentor "helped me think of ways that I could change that" (Sophie, 2023).

Throughout Sophie's narrative, she identifies herself as responsible for "change" (Sophie, 2023) and she is presented as responsible for surviving and thriving in difficult environments. This identity formation is partly co-produced via the hierarchical relationship between mentor and mentee, where Sophie and her mentor frame her difficulty in covering at short notice as a learning opportunity. There is notable tension in Sophie's presentation of responsibility evident in the peculiar wording that follows when she describes having a good relationship with her mentor who she can talk to and, in her words, "not get in trouble for being out of my depth" (Sophie, 2023). Despite the description of a good mentoring relationship, there is an underlying expectation of fear or a performative outlook evident in Sophie's concerns of being "in trouble."

Sophie's internalisation of a difficult sink-or-swim moment ("what can I do better?"; "what can I do to make it so I'm not out of my depth?") demonstrates an element of self-regulation on Sophie's part ("I can change that. I can make it not so daunting"), which is reinforced by the mentor relationship ("she helped me think of ways that I could change"). Sophie's narrative invites a governmental or 'neuroliberal' analysis. Neuroliberalism "essentially individualises and depoliticises social problems by putting the burden on the individual to develop skills of self-regulation in their everyday life" (Zembylas, 2024: 3).

This neuroliberal perspective is reflected in Sophie's narrative, which positions Sophie as the depoliticised learner responsible for covering the class at short notice and then accountable

for self-regulation and professional learning. It is perhaps unsurprising that her metaphors of being out of depth are reflective of this positioning ("What can I do to make it so I'm not out of my depth?") of internalising factors outside of her control as a problem with her professional self, rather than external issues within the school, within the ITTE system, or within society more broadly.

It may be argued that Sophie's story is a positive one. She has had opportunities to learn from a situation via reflection and discussion with her mentor. She has been given an opportunity to develop as a teacher in a real, practice-based setting. Significantly, she has survived to tell the tale in that she continued on her course after this. Drawing on her metaphorical language use – Sophie swam. Yet, it is important here to remember that the original question that Sophie was responding to was about retention in ITTE. A commonly repeated thread throughout her narrative was a feeling of being out of depth. This was a challenge that could potentially 'make or break' Sophie – a 'sink or swim' moment. Thankfully, Sophie stayed on her course. But this is the story that comes to mind for her when she recalls a time when she may have considered leaving. While Sophie swam, we might consider how many others might sink in her position? Alternatively, while Sophie shows resilience in her response, how much longer might she continue swimming against the tide?

It appears significant that Sophie's metaphor of feeling out of her depth repeats and permeates the narrative. It makes an analogy to swimming or trying to stay afloat. Furthermore, it is ultimately treated as something pedagogical. Sophie understandably learns from reflection with her mentor and follows their guidance to improve. But more learning occurs than on this surface level as Sophie and her mentor co-construct meaning, expectations and professional identities in their interaction too. Sophie is habitualised and acculturated to the norms of the school. This habitualisation and acculturation is not only brought about by Sophie's mentor. The formulation of subjectivity takes on a "multidimensional relationship (to others, to things, and to ourselves)" (Rabinow, 1994: xxxi), so Sophie also partly forms her own subjectivity. This is most notable in the sink-or-swim metaphor itself and how it is applied throughout Sophie's narrative description. The rhetorical power of this survival metaphor lies in its function of persuasion, even when it is the self that requires convincing.

Sophie's narrative allows us to "connect microevents to broader discourses and contexts" (Souto-Manning, 2014: 162) as themes of resilience, self-regulation, performance and neuroliberalism begin to manifest. There is also more to say about the nature of the metaphor of being 'out of one's depth' as an analogy for surviving difficult situations, and about what this can suggest about learning. Such questions and emerging themes will be explored further as

I turn to outline some more related analogies and metaphors used by other research participants in the following section.

8.2.2 'Jumping through hoops' and 'Sinking and Swimming'

The previous section outlined student-teacher Sophie's account of covering the class early on in her first placement. Such practices are not uncommon in ITTE placements. Readers of her story, particularly those familiar with schools and ITTE, may not be surprised by the lack of trained cover staff, the request itself for Sophie to cover with little preparation time, and the subsequent agreement to cover by Sophie herself. Guidance on student-teachers covering classes can be unclear, with advice from the National Education Union (NEU) suggesting there is no requirement for student-teachers to do so "except in exceptional circumstances" (NEU, 2022: 5). What counts as "exceptional" is seemingly at the discretion of individual schools and so such norms involving student-teachers covering when unprepared may not be easily challenged. These perceptions and attitudes towards the responsibility of student-teachers are situated within professional cultures and communities wherein a 'sink or swim' discourse may legitimise and normalise the practice. To use another water analogy here: it becomes part of the water that we swim in.

But Sophie's story reveals only one example of a high stakes, 'make or break' situation. It is a story that features a recurring metaphorical motif of being 'out of one's depth', which, given its meaning of staying afloat relates to the 'sink or swim' metaphor too. At this point it is worth considering what other common analogies and metaphors exist in ITTE discourses, as well as questioning what other conditions such words and phrases can describe for student-teachers and teacher-educators. In what other ways are metaphors of survival and competition used in narratives and discourses by different actors working in ITTE? To shed some light on these metaphors, I present here some prompted discussions with teacher-educators. I describe these as 'prompted' because discussions about types of metaphors used to describe ITTE developed from the physical presence of board games during interviews, or because metaphors were explicitly mentioned and questioned in interviews.

Metaphors can have social and cultural functions as "mini-narratives [which] contribute to the discursive mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from the political community" (Mottier, 2008: 192), in this case in ITTE communities. By encouraging dialogue with research participants about commonly used metaphors which describe student experiences, mentoring relationships, and ITTE placements, an attempt was made to invite a critical stance on such

metaphors to understand what they might mean in context, and to disrupt and destabilise such normalised thinking.

In a group interview with teacher-educators, participants offered their own examples of commonly used phrases. One participant, Chloe, offered the metaphorical “jumping through hoops” (Chloe, 2023) while another participant, Lisa, offered “jumping on board” (Lisa, 2023). After I suggested that language relating to survival might be used to describe experiences in ITTE, Lisa suggested the phrase “get through this year” and “just get through your placement” (Lisa, 2023). There appears to be a shared recognition of individual phrases (metaphorical and otherwise) in the group interview, as well as an understanding of metaphor use in education more generally. For example, when Chloe suggests “jumping through hoops”, Lisa responds:

> ‘Jumping through hoops’, yeah, absolutely… There’s a lot of metaphors and… similes, and all that sort of thing in education, just generally in the language, isn’t there? (Lisa, 2023).

Lisa indicates here that she recognises the phrase that Chloe offers. She also recognises that figurative language can be commonly used when professionals talk about education. Drawing on other phrases offered like ‘moving the goalposts’ and ideas around competition, Lisa offers some ideas about why figurative language use might be common and what kind of discourse it promotes. She indicates why such language is used:

> For me, they’re like easy cultural references. Like, you know what a goal post is… You know those sorts of things. (Lisa, 2023).

Lisa then moves on to:

> Competition and striving to win… and maybe that’s sometimes, subconsciously, what you’re doing with mentoring because you want that person to be better. You want them to succeed, so then you treat it like a challenge. It’s a challenge. A challenge, isn’t it? (Lisa, 2023).

In her responses, Lisa touches on a number of mostly metaphorical phrases. Given the focus on games and related games-based phrases in interviews, Lisa mostly focuses on these phrases and metaphors, but attention is also drawn to other related phrases. The first, offered first by Chloe and reiterated by Lisa, is the idea of ‘jumping through hoops.’ The phrase doesn’t refer to the experience of one student-teacher, but for both Chloe and Lisa it signifies a broader, general idea and both teacher-educators find familiarity in the phrase. It is recognisable, to use Lisa’s words, as a ‘cultural reference’.

Of course, the phrase ‘jumping through hoops’ is not specifically associated with ITTE, or with education more broadly. It can be assumed that most people understand what it means to jump through hoops as a socially and culturally shared reference point. The phrase conjures images of circus players or acrobats performing for entertainment purposes and it describes performing tasks “that seem difficult or unnecessary in order to achieve something” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, jump through hoops entry). In terms of education, ‘jumping through hoops’ can refer to unnecessary or unwanted workload demands. But we should perhaps be cautious of this playful language that can euphemistically disguise the real burdens that teaching staff can face. As Shaw writes: “merely writing off performative requirements as a harmless exercise – as just ‘jumping through hoops’ – normalizes the extra strain” (Shaw, 2019: 27-28).

Shaw touches on a crucial point. Though writing about music teachers, his comment is easily applicable to student-teachers too. ‘Jumping through hoops’ carries the image of performance, and the idea of performativity. But its repeated use as a phrase to convey such meanings also potentially normalises these practices. And it is this problem of normalisation that matters in language highlighted in previous sections (‘make or break’; being ‘out of one’s depth’). Lisa offers other phrases, like ‘jumping on board’ which can conjure ideas of conformity or compliance. Considering the language of survival in ITTE, she also offers ‘get through this year,’ and ‘just get through your placement.’

Such phrases may normalise the idea that the strain is worth it in the short-term, as if the strain – the hoops to jump through – will eventually disappear once the student-teacher has qualified. Ultimately, Lisa ties many of these commonly used phrases together with the idea that mentoring of student-teachers is “a challenge” (Lisa, 2023). It is a helpful word here that can bring together high-stakes binary language (‘make or break’), survival metaphors (being ‘out of one’s depth’), and other figurative language (‘jumping through hoops’) that potentially normalise the strain (Shaw, 2019) that student-teachers are faced with.

Sophie’s narrative repeats a metaphor related to swimming (being ‘out of one’s depth’). Before closing this section, it is worth highlighting some other related metaphors from another teacher-educator. Discussing changes to ITTE in recent years, teacher-educator Brooke suggests that an additional year of training (i.e. the ECT year) could be a positive step for ITTE. Reflecting on her own training and becoming qualified to teach, she describes working as a ‘Newly Qualified Teacher’ (NQT) with little support in her first year:

> You just got chucked in at the deep end and it was literally, “Right, here’s your class.” Nobody came to see you. I think I had one observation in a year (Brooke, 2023).

Her response shares a similarity with Sophie’s narrative in that another analogy to swimming is made. Where Sophie refers to being out of her depth, Brooke describes being “chucked in at the deep end.” There are clear conceptual similarities between these phrases, not only because they relate to staying afloat while learning to swim, but because they relate to difficulties, strains, and challenges of ITTE (and the years following). Again, these phrases allude to high-stakes ‘make or break’ – or more appropriately in this context, ‘sink or swim’ – circumstances. Shortly after this, Brooke makes a similar point, and with a similar metaphor:

> When I was newly qualified, I was in a good place. But I think it was literally: “We’re taking your arm bands off now, now swim.” And now I think there’s a bit more opportunity to have that accessible support through mentoring (Brooke, 2023).

Again, another metaphor related to learning to swim is used, in this case “taking your arm bands off.” A certain harshness also comes from the inclusion of, “now swim” afterwards. Brooke is describing her own training, which took place years before current reforms. Yet the high-stakes, survival metaphors describing trying to stay afloat persist today. Sophie’s description of being out of her depth offers one example and suggests “the presence of recycled institutional discourses” (Souto-Manning, 2014: 163) which appear to linger and recur throughout professional narratives and within a common cultural lexicon in ITTE.

Brooke’s swimming analogies were not prompted but came out in our conversation nonetheless. However, when I highlighted to Brooke that she had used such metaphors, she then noticed her own language use later on in the interview.

> I think the whole education system is just really a little bit broken and I… I think it’s really difficult to – by policy – fix it. By just throwing different initiatives into the mix, like ITAPs [Intensive Teaching and Practice], like mentoring. I think they’re all, they’re all useful things. But they need to be thought about in terms of the bigger picture of what education looks like. Um, because there’s so much pressure on the children. There’s so much pressure on the children. And it’s almost like, I don’t know, it just feels like we’re treading water – I’ve come back to our water analogy (Brooke, 2023).

Brooke describes an education system that is “really a little bit broken” and touches on the difficulties that education policy has when faced with this. It is this system that student-teachers are required to survive and thrive in. Brooke discusses the effects that a high-stakes environment can have on the learning of a student-teacher, as well as on an ECT:

> If the ECT or the student is reflective and starts to really think about how they want to improve their practice, quite often the feedback is: they do. But they’re so overwhelmed with the workload, it’s very difficult to do that (Brooke, 2023).

Considering previous sections of this chapter and Brooke’s words above, it might be suggested that in striving for a quality ITTE system in which quality is mostly defined by distinctions of ‘good’ vs ‘poor’ and ‘high-quality’ vs ‘low-quality’, an accepted environment of high-stakes challenge exists for student-teachers, whereby a teacher’s work is defined by challenge, strain and difficulty. These binary distinctions can potentially simplify the complexities of ‘quality’ in terms of teaching, mentoring, placements and schools. Nonetheless, norms can be encouraged, upheld or exacerbated by such language and discourse. These discourses of performance, resilience and survival can both define, reproduce but also co-create such conditions in ITTE, for example in mentoring research literature, in conversations between mentors and student-teachers, and in the everyday minutiae of language elements such as the metaphorical expressions which underscore such discourses.

What Brooke highlights additionally is that while student-teachers want to learn and to “improve their practice”, they are often “so overwhelmed with the workload” that they cannot. In other words, students may want to reflect on their practice, but the conditions and norms of overwork often restrict this. Such conditions are surely not conducive to a high-quality learning environment.

After Brooke notices her “water analogy”, she returns to illustrate her point more clearly:

> But it does. It just feels like you’re treading water and you’re just keeping your head above to try and, like, hang on in there. And, and then, you know, people are just getting tired – aren’t they? – and sinking (Brooke, 2023).

Brooke closes on a crucial point regarding ‘sink or swim’ metaphors. There is only so much that educators can take before they begin to ‘sink.’ Such ideas will inform the following sections and chapters. The next section will turn to another recurring theme that has been present in some questionnaire comments and interviews. That theme is ‘luck’.

8.3 Luck of the Draw

So far, this chapter has noted several seemingly common language elements in discourses around ITTE and mentoring. Examples noted so far include binary distinctions like ‘make or break’ or ‘sink or swim’, performance metaphors like ‘jumping through hoops’, as well as swimming and survival metaphors like feeling ‘out of one’s depth’ being ‘thrown in the deep end’ and ‘treading water’. In closing this section, I now return briefly to part of a comment mentioned at the start of this chapter in order to explore one more interrelated idea:

> The mentors can make or break not only your placement but your whole experience on your PGCE. I have been lucky but some students have had a very rough time (QP39, 2024).

The comment begins with the binary distinction of ‘make or break’ as previously discussed (see section 8.2). The next sentence then offers a comparison to other student-teachers’ experiences: “I have been lucky but some students have had a very rough time.” The sentence is striking. As detailed earlier in this chapter, the student-teacher indicates a number of key issues in their commentary. Issues include a feeling of “inconsistent expectations” (QP39, 2024), mentors being informed about having a student-teacher to mentor only a day before the placement begins, and a resultant lack of time for this mentor to receive adequate training and guidance. Yet, they class themselves as “lucky”.

The language of luck is worth further exploration here. But luck is also referenced by another student-teacher in their questionnaire comments. Additionally, interview transcripts also contain several mentions of the language of luck. The remainder of this section of the chapter explores this language, beginning with the second mention of luck in the questionnaires. This questionnaire participant’s words have been explored amongst other comments earlier in this chapter too but as with the previous comment I place it here to reiterate how distinctions are used in student-teachers’ discourses about quality mentoring, as well as to present the related use of the language of luck.

> My last placement was awful and I wasn’t supported so I have to repeat a placement because of it… I’m just lucky that I have a great mentor and I’m at a good school now (QP48, 2024).

The distinctions between an “awful” placement with little to no support compared with a “great mentor” and “good school” have been noted. Interestingly, it is the phrasing “I’m just lucky” which frames this distinction between their previous placement and their current placement.

Neither questionnaire participant agreed to take part in interviews, so a lack of context remains regarding what might have been meant by both comments. However, we may presume that QP39 feels lucky as they perceived that they had a better experience in comparison to other student-teachers, while QP48 appears to feel lucky now in comparison to their prior placement. It would appear then that both participants are using the language of luck comparatively.

Language of contrast and comparison has marked much of this chapter so far. Some of these comparisons are seemingly personal, for example the distinctions inherent in 'make and break' and 'sink or swim' metaphors are largely based on individual success. Some comparisons are social, as in the way that a student-teacher may compare the quality of their relationships and experiences with others. Some comparisons relate to mentors, while others relate to placements or schools more generally. Some comparisons are made temporally, for example comparisons are made between earlier experiences and later experiences.

Many of these comparisons reveal a perception of inconsistency: Not all schools are good schools, not all placements are good placements, not all mentors are good mentors. And with these inconsistencies come concerns about chance and probability. From some student-teachers' viewpoints, their fate is determined by a *roll of the dice*, a *twist of fate*, or the *luck of the draw* – in other words, that which is 'left to chance.' The rest of this section will therefore consider the recurring language of luck used in interviews, both in terms of how it relates to concepts of distinction and comparison, and in terms of how it employs the language of chance and therefore feeds into a wider discourse about education as a game. In doing so I will firstly outline a narrative from another student-teacher in the next section.

8.3.1 "I didn't allow myself to feel like that while I was there" (Zahra's Story)

In responding to an interview question about quality mentoring, student-teacher Zahra describes "a really bad experience in my first placement" (Zahra, 2024) with her mentor. Initially, Zahra is hesitant to tell her story but explains that it was not the feedback she was given itself that was the problem, but in how it was given. She describes this as "a shame, because what she said wasn't wrong, it's how she did it."

Zahra goes on to explain:

> One of the things she picked up was my subject knowledge. Um, and it was really bizarre the way it was happening. So, I was passing all my key themes

> or trackers. I was on point and everything, but she still manages to get me onto the RIT [Rapid Improvement Targets], even at this stage (Zahra, 2024).

Zahra is clearly upset about the feedback given. She is also surprised at the outcome, which she did not see coming as she appeared to be making good progress in other ways. She describes how her University Tutor was made aware and "got involved very discreetly. They did it really nicely, professionally" (Zahra, 2024). In continuing to tell her story, Zahra seems to want to share more but is unable to find the words:

> And yeah, it was, um, how do I say this? See, at that time, I just took on board what was being said because, like I said, what she said wasn't wrong, it's how she did it (Zahra, 2024).

Zahra's struggle to find her words sees her fall back on repeating the same words used before, "what she said wasn't wrong, it's how she did it." Following this, Zahra hesitates again in resuming her story:

> And um, I don't really want to discuss it because it would be very unprofessional of me. But at that time, I took it on board and I go: Fine. And you know, I carried on (Zahra, 2024).

At this point, Zahra explains that she does not want to talk in detail about the situation on the grounds of being "unprofessional." Where Zahra is able to discuss factual details about her experience, such as being "picked up" on her "subject knowledge" (Zahra, 2024), being placed onto a Rapid Improvement Targets process (a course intervention to ensure student-teachers make satisfactory progress), and speaking with her University Tutor, she is more apprehensive to discuss *how* her mentor's feedback was given. It is "how she did it" (Zahra, 2024) that appears to cause Zahra the most upset in recalling her experience and cause her the most difficulty in communicating it.

Zahra also describes going to visit the headteacher at her placement school. She states, "I needed to" and adds, "because with me I was at risk" (Zahra, 2024). Zahra is aware of the risk to herself as a trainee being placed onto an intervention plan. Her visit to the headteacher results in the headteacher agreeing with Zahra's mentor. Zahra explains, "You know, so he basically supported what she said." But there is a difference in the way Zahra feels about the interaction as she adds, "He was very professional in the sense that he was very supportive." This support is then described: "He gave me some advice, gave me some tips." Zahra does

caveat this support to some extent by adding “even though […] it was a bit condescending to be honest with you” (Zahra, 2024).

Despite the headteacher appearing “condescending” to Zahra, she deems his approach more “professional” than her mentor’s. The way that feedback is given appears highly important to Zahra and the feedback from the headteacher seems more appropriate to her. Given that she has had some corroboration from her mentor and headteacher too, Zahra resigns herself more readily to the feedback. She explains, “Two people are saying this. That’s fine.” Having a second opinion is validating for Zahra, but perhaps equally important is the way in which the headteacher was more “supportive” and “professional” (Zahra, 2024) towards her.

Following this, Zahra says:

> So, I persevered, got through. Um, and I remember in the two weeks, the Christmas holidays, that’s when I allowed myself to feel sorry for myself, I’ll be honest with you. Because I knew intuitively it was wrong, what had happened to me. Um, and it knocked my confidence, and that’s why I didn’t allow myself to feel like that while I was there, because that’s the crucial thing (Zahra, 2024).

Zahra begins here by detailing her perseverance, stating: “I persevered, got through.” This language reflects her earlier statement about her mentor’s initial feedback: “I took it on board and I go: Fine. And you know, I carried on” (Zahra, 2024). Zahra describes a level of resilience on her part. Interestingly, this language is framed in ways identified by other interview participants earlier in this chapter. When teacher-educators discussed metaphors and other common phrases used in ITTE (see section 8.2.2), Lisa offered the phrase “jumping on board.” When ideas around survival were mentioned, Lisa included “get through this year” and “just get through your placement” (Lisa, 2023).

When talking of her own perseverance, Zahra draws on a mentality defined by the phrase “just get through your placement” (Lisa, 2023) with her words “I persevered, got through” (Zahra, 2024). Yet, her perseverance during her placement involves compartmentalising her emotional response to her feedback. It is during the Christmas holidays when Zahra opens herself back up to her own emotional responses. Zahra seems acutely aware of this and talks of *allowing* herself to feel during this time of rest, yet not allowing herself “to feel like that while I was there” (Zahra, 2024). For Zahra, “that’s the crucial thing” (Zahra, 2024).

Here we have a phrase that provides a link between Zahra's perseverance with Lisa's suggested "just get through your placement" (Lisa, 2023) mindset. Given how Zahra explained her resilience earlier, stating: "I took it on board […] I carried on" and how she discusses her compartmentalisation of her emotional response, we may see this earlier phrase in a new light. Furthermore, her choice of words "I took it on board" reflects syntactically Lisa's idea of 'jumping on board' and thematically Sophie's metaphorical references to swimming and survival. Both 'jumping on board' and 'taking (something) on board' can relate to nautical imagery of preparing a boat for setting sail. Alongside Sophie's metaphors relating to being 'out of one's depth', we might say that Sophie and Zahra share in the metaphorical imagery of navigating rough waters. More so today, 'jumping on board' and 'taking on board' stand as metaphors for compliance, conformity, and for adopting feedback or accepting someone else's ideas. This is not the first time Zahra mentions something along these lines, stating earlier, "See, at that time, I just took on board what was being said" (Zahra, 2024).

Zahra continues to tell her story:

> And it's broke a lot of my peers, because some of them had these experiences too. […] I was able to persevere and be resilient. But then when I allowed myself to feel sorry for myself, that two weeks, a lot of my confidence went so down that I didn't wanna go back into teaching (Zahra, 2024).

Zahra explains how her first placement experience involved a large amount of personal resilience on her part. When able to allow herself to "feel sorry" (Zahra, 2024) for herself, she realises a loss of confidence to the point that she considers not going back into teaching. Zahra expresses some of the make-or-break decisions that student-teachers face in-between and during placements throughout their ITTE experience. She even draws on similar 'make or break' language explored earlier, notable in the first sentence of the quotation above: "And it's broke a lot of my peers" (Zahra, 2024).

Connections between Zahra and Sophie's stories begin to become apparent here. Both discuss their thoughts about coming close to leaving their ITTE courses. Both stories are told with a prevailing theme of resilience. Both stories relate to relationships and dialogues with mentors. Both stories also reference 'luck.' For example, Sophie states how she is "lucky" (Sophie, 2023) for having a mentor similar to herself. Again, discussing a different mentor in a later interview Sophie says "I've been quite lucky. The mentor that I have, I've got on really well with. I know classmates haven't always got on with theirs" (Sophie, 2024).

Like Sophie, Zahra draws on the language of 'luck' as she continues her narrative. After discussing how her confidence fell to the point where she did not want to return to her course after her first placement, she states, "I was so afraid to go back in January. Luckily, I went somewhere that just helped my confidence and boost it up" (Zahra, 2024). She talks of her 'luck' in terms of receiving a needed confidence boost in her second placement. "A discourse is only powerful when it is recycled in stories everyday people tell" (Souto-Manning, 2014: 163), therefore it is worth considering how narratives involving luck come from both Zahra and Sophie, as well as questionnaire participants mentioned in this chapter, and how this perception of luck can often describe student-teachers' comparisons between mentors or placements.

Much of this chapter so far has detailed comparative language used when student-teachers compare their own experiences with a perception of others' experiences, as well as when they compare their own placements and mentors between placement periods. For Zahra, the term "luckily" (Zahra, 2024) presents and frames this latter comparison. On the one hand, she has had a poor experience in her first placement with her confidence being knocked to the point of being "afraid to go back" into schools. On the other hand, she deems herself lucky to find herself in a placement "that just helped my confidence and boost it up" (Zahra, 2024).

Barrett (2006) explains that "luck requires something unintended or otherwise unexpected, not something we are justified in expecting" (Barrett, 2006: 77). This is an important point to consider in Zahra's context. For her, going into a second placement is fraught with the memories of her first. In other words, her experience of her first placement predicates an expectation for the second. In Zahra's assertion: "Luckily, I went somewhere that just helped my confidence and boost it up" (Zahra, 2024), she presents a placement experience that stands in polar opposition to her first placement experience.

Zahra compares her first and second placement, but for her third term she was expected to return to her original placement school with her original class and mentor. Zahra goes on to explain that she asked for a new mentor before returning to her original placement school.

> I just didn't wanna go back to that mentor, and I was able to arrange that. So, I'm actually gonna be in another class with a different mentor. And I've never met this person before. So, I think, you know, and I say this to myself, you know: If I'm ever in a position and I'm having to be a mentor, you really got to be kind. Be decent (Zahra, 2024).

Zahra's words stand as a lesson for mentors, if only targeted at her (possible) self in years to come. For Zahra, decency and kindness are core pedagogical values that she felt were lacking in her first placement experience with her mentor.

Like Sophie's narrative, Zahra's story also invites a neuroliberal analysis given that there is a "burden on the individual to develop skills of self-regulation" (Zembylas, 2024: 3), in this case via self-knowledge and self-control of "cognitive strategies, emotions, and pre-cognitive affects" (Whitehead et al., 2019: 633). For Zahra, she regulates her own emotional response to 'just get through' her placement. This burden is highlighted by Zahra's lost confidence and her subsequent commitment to compartmentalise her emotional response when she states "that's why I didn't allow myself to feel like that when I was there" (Zahra, 2024).

But despite the 'luck of the draw' in terms of Zahra being allocated a school, a class, and a mentor, Zahra does not resign herself to her fate. Her second placement "luckily" (Zahra, 2024) helps her realise that she has options and some level of control over her experience. So, while we can describe Zahra as self-regulating in how she suppresses her feelings to survive her placement, she later chooses to "arrange" (Zahra, 2024) an alternative. In doing so she demonstrates agency in changing her placement to "another class with a different mentor" (Zahra, 2024).

There is some element of strategy involved in Zahra's decision. She has not simply left her fate completely to chance. Yet questions remain about her chances or her 'luck' in securing a positive placement with a kind and decent mentor as she might hope. Further questions remain in ITTE more broadly: Must today's student-teachers experience placements and mentorship relationships as 'make or break' or 'sink or swim' moments? What do these narratives of survival and resilience and associations with 'luck' and 'chance' say about the wider metaphor of education as a game? Must a 'quality' ITTE system be defined by difficulty, resilience and survival?

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated large discrepancies between policy claims of quality and the ways in which these discourses play out in practices. Recurring metaphorical phrases like 'make or break' suggest binary distinctions between perceptions of quality. This language often centres around perceptions of placements or mentors, for example suggesting that particular schools or particular mentors can 'make or break' a student-teacher's ITTE experience.

Related language implies a ‘sink or swim’ narrative with references made to feeling ‘out of depth’ in difficult situations, of being ‘thrown in the deep end’ when unprepared, and of ‘treading water’ to keep up with the increasingly challenging demands of teaching and of learning to teach. These words, phrases and metaphorical ideas can become “building-blocks” (Mottier, 2008: 192) of wider narratives and discourses in ITTE. Arguably these are counter-narratives or counter-discourses which present the underside or inverse of dominant ‘quality’ discourses as they play out in ITTE practices.

In addition, this chapter has considered a recurring language of luck. While ‘luck’ can often be tied to the ‘make or break’ and ‘sink or swim’ language of survival, it is also related to the language of games – of fate, fortune and chance. Finding a good placement or a good mentor is often considered by student-teachers as a lucky outcome. This also suggests something of a counter-narrative to a prevailing notion in discourses of quality that improvement can come about through market reform. In reality, rather than creating a high-quality system for all, a relative or comparative concept of quality simply classifies, categorises and ranks with the inevitable outcome that for all of the high-quality experiences suggested or proposed, the reality is a widely variable – and sometimes a perceptibly low-quality – experience.

While some student-teachers will understandably thrive, many others will struggle to survive. We must further question such concepts of quality and their effects. Further consideration will be undertaken throughout the following chapters and into the discussion (chapter eleven). The next chapter explores the metaphor of ‘playing the game’ in ITTE by focusing on interviews with student-teachers and teacher-educators. This remains a continuation of my primary data analysis which concludes in chapter ten.

Chapter 9: Playing the Ofsted Game

9.1 Introduction

Following on from the previous chapter, this chapter continues to explore language used in interviews conducted with student-teachers and teacher-educators. While the previous chapter focuses on narratives of survival in ITTE experiences with consideration of comparative language such as 'making or breaking' and 'sinking or swimming', the main focus of this chapter is on the metaphorical language of 'playing the game.'

My research design explored how I could bring attention to the abstract metaphorical language indicated by 'playing the game', sometimes elaborated as 'playing the Ofsted game' and also used as in the phrase, 'We have to play the game'. 'Playing the game' is mostly used throughout this chapter but relates to these three interchangeable phrasings with 'Ofsted' often implied rather than explicitly mentioned. It was my intention to bring this metaphorical phrase to the attention of interview participants.

Throughout this chapter, research questions will be considered including: To what extent can metaphorical language constitute and reproduce discourses and practices related to policy reforms in ITTE today? And following on from this, what are the effects of these metaphors, discourses and practices? To begin with, this chapter outlines responses to questions about the metaphorical phrase of 'playing the game' asked in interviews.

9.2 Recognition of the Game

A major element of my methodological approach to conducting research interviews was in the attempt to reify the metaphor of 'playing the game' in education (see section 4.3). During interviews held in-person, this consisted of the placement of traditional board games and cards on tables for participants. Playing games was optional for participants but not a necessary part of the process. For me, the purpose was in bringing games to the table, to make their presence concrete rather than abstract, and therefore to talk more openly and explicitly about the idea of 'playing the game' in education.

In the early design stages of my approach, I had suspected that most participants would know of such phrases that relate to this metaphorical idea of 'playing the game', for example the phrase, 'We have to play the game' or 'We must play the Ofsted game.' However, to avoid any assumptions of whether this was known to all, I asked participants if they were familiar with such language before exploring its possible meanings and effects. All six of the teacher-

educators interviewed were familiar with such phrases. However, responses were less consistent for student-teachers. This section explores these responses, firstly focusing on student-teacher responses and then on the responses of teacher-educators.

9.2.1 Student-Teacher Responses

Recognition of 'playing the game' was less consistent with student-teachers in comparison to teacher-educators. In a face-to-face group interview with student-teachers, participants Amira and Grace indicated that they had not come across the idea of 'playing the game.' Although when asked about the phrase 'levelling the playing field', Amira replied, "I've heard that one, and 'moving the goalposts'" (Amira, 2024) indicating the phrase on a handout provided during the interview. She follows up with, "I don't think they've called it 'playing the game'" (Amira, 2024). When another student-teacher, Ella, enters the room afterwards to participate she also indicates that she does not recognise the 'playing the game' phrase. Similarly to Amira, she adds: "I've definitely heard some of these other ones though. 'Levelling the playing field', 'moving the goalposts'… Definitely heard more of those" (Ella, 2024).

In another interview, student-teacher Selma indicates that she is unfamiliar with the phrase. Selma was asked if she was familiar with the phrases 'playing the game' or 'we have to play the game.' Selma's response begins, "No. But you know what?" (Selma, 2024). Selma then asks, "Can I just say an extra little bit?" (Selma, 2024). She then discusses her understanding of the Finnish school system, drawing attention to the fact that "they do so well in PISA and things, PIRLS and all that" (Selma, 2024) in reference to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).

Selma alludes to the rankings that such International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) generate:

> They're not at the top at the moment. But in 2010, I think it was, they were like really close to, or, was at the top in certain areas […] They do so well, and they had nothing like what we have. Private schools are not there. They're banned, you know, it's just… And it's run by educators in the Ministry of Education (Selma, 2024).

Selma discusses some of the differences between Finnish and English education systems but adds that “it’s hard to compare” (Selma, 2024) two countries considering varying factors like size. She continues:

> But I’m just thinking, like, sometimes what they do, and they do so well, is it… OK, well, can we copy that? […] Are we supposed to ignore the fact that they’re doing so well? And play the game here? And, you know, just catch up with these people and know that they’re doing so well? (Selma, 2024).

Selma adds that she is interested in Singapore and China in terms of understanding how “they do well as well” (Selma, 2024). Then she asks me: “Would that be playing the game, just doing what you’re told… in that sense?” (Selma, 2024).

Selma’s response is an interesting one. She firstly indicates no recognition of the idea of ‘playing the game.’ She asks to add more to the discussion, and in doing so brings up the international assessments of PISA and PIRLS. Though she initially states that the idea of ‘playing the game’ is unfamiliar to her, she appears to intuitively relate this idea to ILSA rankings and questions the English education system using comparisons with Finland, Singapore and China and their positions in such rankings as markers for educational quality.

Selma negotiates these ideas with the contextual elements that make these different education systems distinct, for example describing Finland as a country where private schools are “banned” (Selma, 2024). In fact, there are a small number of private schools in Finland, but Selma is likely alluding to the fact that these are publicly funded, under public supervision, required to follow a national curriculum, and legally forbidden to pursue financial gain (European Commission, 2024). Therefore, they are largely unlike private schools in England which can be run for profit, not required to follow the national curriculum, and may adhere to alternative inspection requirements to state schools (UK Government, n.d.).

Selma’s response may align with typical reactions to ILSA outcomes and the international rankings they can produce. A 2010 DfE paper, *The Case for Change*, opens with England’s PISA position at the time:

> England was 17th in reading, 24th in mathematics and 14th in science – ahead of countries like Spain, the USA and Italy, but still well behind, for example, Finland, Hong Kong and Canada (DfE, 2010a: 2).

Like Selma's response, the following sentence of the report draws attention to Finland, the country sitting "at the top of the international league table in this round of tests" (DfE, 2010a: 2). A recurrent language of competition is apparent throughout the text with descriptions of an "international league table" with a lead country "at the top" and England many places below in the ranking order. Though "ahead" of some countries, England is "still well behind" (DfE, 2010a: 2) others. Such discourse drives a "necessity for the country to perform better in international league tables" (Mutton and Burn, 2024: 219), which in turn creates an appetite for educational reform.

More recently, as discussed in previous chapters (e.g. chapter two on the implementation of ITTE policy reforms; chapter seven on policy discourse and language of competition), this has led towards "a policy discourse around the need to improve both teacher quality and, by extension, the quality of teachers' professional education" (Mutton and Burn, 2024: 220), which is legitimised by the challenge "to do better in order to achieve national results that are comparable to those which are the highest performing" (Mutton and Burn, 2024: 220).

Mutton and Burn (2024) describe a trajectory beginning from the PISA league table rankings cited in *The Case for Change* leading towards an accelerated policy focus on 'quality of teaching', which in turn has led towards reform of teacher education including more recent reform to ITTE in England. Selma's response to a question about the language of games in education is perhaps indicative of some similar patterns of thought. Though "hard to compare" (Selma, 2024) different countries and their different contexts, she asks "can we copy that?" reflecting a common policy response towards such global competition that ILSAs can encourage. Their influence on policymakers continues today and their effect as "an increasingly influential mediator and rationalisation for policy borrowing seems inexorable" (Burdett and O'Donnell, 2016: 116).

While Selma's response seems to somewhat coincide with a notion that education today is largely conceptualised as an international geopolitical competition that pits countries against one another as they strive for the best results, she also wonders in an alternate fashion, "are we supposed to ignore the fact that they're doing so well? And play the game here?" (Selma, 2024). Again, *The Case for Change* can inform the discussion here:

> In this country, the debate has focused too frequently on whether the standards today match those of the past – but the real question is how to make the improvement necessary to match the best standards being achieved elsewhere, right now (DfE, 2010a: 2).

These words present the idea that educational reform has formerly looked to the country's history to consider quality and "standards today" (DfE, 2010a: 2). But now "the real question" (DfE, 2010a: 2) is seemingly about how education systems can match or outperform their rivals in the geopolitical arena of educational performance. While Selma does consider how countries might seek to "copy" (Selma, 2024) others, for example via "policy borrowing" (Burdett and O'Donnell, 2016: 116), she also questions factors which a country might "ignore" (Selma, 2024) through the limitations of what is deemed politically possible or achievable by the powers of the DfE and Ofsted in England.

For instance, Selma appears to suggest that Finland's approach to laws regarding private school have some responsibility for their success in terms of PISA rankings. In the assortment of educational policy reform imperatives put forth since 2010 to the time of Selma's interview, there has been no agenda to reform the private school sector as a way to improve "quality of teaching" for all and to better support "pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds" (DfE, 2019a: 3) despite findings that "the greatest schooling inequality by a very long distance lies in the resources gap between the private (fee-paying) and state sectors" (Green, 2022: 1). Despite the geopolitical challenge, there are limitations, unquestioned norms, geographical contexts, historical traditions, and political choices at the heart of what is and what is not deemed possible in terms of educational reform.

Selma's response not only demonstrates the relationship between metaphors of 'playing the game' and a conceptualisation of education as a competition between countries, she also displays how this conceptualisation can be established. In being presented with phrases related to 'playing the game' Selma attempts to uncover the meaning for herself, and her responses demonstrate how she thinks this through. She explores possible meanings which relate the phrases to reactionary responses to a nation's ILSA rankings but finally settles on a question: "Would that be playing the game, just doing what you're told… in that sense?" (Selma, 2024). Her idea of playing the game rests on "just doing what you're told" (Selma, 2024) in the context of following national policy and therefore complying and conforming to the given rules, despite some perceived dissonance between what other countries might be doing differently.

The response that Selma gives offers a glimpse into the power that a metaphor can have. By her own declaration, Selma has indicated that 'playing the game' is not something she is familiar with in the context of education. It does not take her long to process the metaphor, while thinking aloud in her response, and relate the phrase to ideas around international league table performance as an indication of quality, as well as related ideas around

competition, compliance and conformity. Selma's example demonstrates the extent to which knowledge of such metaphors can be acquired tacitly – that is to say it is not explicitly *taught*, but it appears to be *learned* nonetheless. But this kind of tacit knowledge may present further questions: What are the game 'rules' if any, where do they come from, and who is required to follow them? Just how many 'games' are there to speak of (and is it even possible to say)? What does it mean to win, and what does it mean to lose in such educational 'games'?

While Selma, Amira and Ella show little recognition in their responses, for the majority of student-teachers phrases related to 'playing the game' are more familiar. Sophie states that she cannot recall the specific context of a time she had heard the phrase, but says, "I've definitely heard it before, like you gotta just go along with what's being told for now, and it will change shortly" (Sophie, 2024). Another student-teacher, Lina, also recognises the phrase and relates it to another:

> It reminds me of 'choose your battles' I think […] For me it sounds like, um, taking the easier route with things, maybe not challenging authority, or systems in place (Lina, 2024).

Another student-teacher Janine offers a telling response:

> Yes, when it comes to, kind of like, Ofsted [laughter]. Yes, we've got to… we've got to play the game. We've got to give them what they need to see. Yeah, definitely (Janine, 2024).

Janine considers the contexts in which she has heard 'playing the game' phrases used, adding "and it's not always senior leaders, sometimes it's just the class teachers – and it's a case of, you know, like they're just playing the game" (Janine, 2024). Janine's initial laughter gives something of an indication towards her level of recognition here. It perhaps demonstrates that she finds the phrase humorous, but it also suggests a potentially stronger familiarity than other student-teachers in the immediate response to this recognition of the phrase and its implications. Janine's is not the only response that involves laughter, and possible interpretations of this kind of response from teacher-educators will be explored in more depth in the next section.

While two other student-teachers show familiarity with the idea of 'playing the game', their responses are less immediate than the examples given above. For example, when student-teacher Karim is asked whether he has heard the phrase, he replies, "No, not heard that" (Karim, 2024). When it is then rephrased as 'We need to play the Ofsted game' Karim replies,

“Ah, I’ve heard that one. I’ve heard that one” (Karim, 2024). In then explaining his understanding he suggests that the phrase can be interpreted as “basically, just play by their rules” (Karim, 2024). Karim adds that such a mindset can be both “helpful and not helpful” (Karim, 2024). He then clarifies his position:

> Sometimes, I feel like there’s too much pressure and… But then, at the end of the day, you always do need… you do need rules to follow […] You need examples to follow, so yeah. But sometimes it can be a bit overwhelming […] But at the end of the day, it’s got to be done (Karim, 2024).

Like Karim, student-teacher Zahra also does not initially recognise the ‘playing the game’ phrase. Zahra responds: “No. Um, please don’t tell me what I think it means. But no, I haven’t heard that one” (Zahra, 2024). Zahra is initially unfamiliar with the phrase although has an idea that it might be something disconcerting as demonstrated by her stating “please don’t tell me” (Zahra, 2024) as though she has some early negative suspicions. Without any further prompting she then realises that the phrase is in fact familiar to her:

> Oh, I think I… It makes sense now […] Yeah, OK, I think I might know… I’ve actually… I think I’ve seen it in practice, in fact […] When Ofsted arrives, how, you know, the schools will change everything the way that, you know, which… which I always kind of question. I go: Why do we need to change? We’re doing it right to begin with… Even as far as data, as well, being changed (Zahra, 2024).

Zahra at first does not recognise the phrase ‘We have to play the Ofsted game.’ But moments later when she realises, she is able to articulate clearly how schools can seemingly change practices during an Ofsted inspection. She even indicates towards elements of deceit in ‘playing the Ofsted game’ whereby attainment data can be fabricated or amended to show the school in a more favourable light to inspectors.

These various responses from student-teachers depict a range of perspectives. While some are very familiar with ‘playing the game’ phrases and immediately relate them to quality assurance measures, often in terms of Ofsted inspections, some are not at all familiar with the phrase. Others like Selma, are able to associate the previously unknown phrase to an overarching geopolitical competition that appears to manifest from the league table rankings that International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) can generate. However, even though there were some student-teachers who did not recognise the phrase, they could relate to other

metaphorical phrases used in educational contexts, including ‘moving the goalposts’ and ‘levelling the playing field,’ the latter of which is the central focus of chapter ten.

It could be argued that there are two distinct groups of student-teachers evident in terms of the recognition of the ‘playing the game’ metaphor: those who know and those who do not know. However, such a distinction removes some of the complexity of what this knowledge is and how it can operate. Within the group of those who do know the phrase, there are those who recognise the phrase more immediately (for example, as demonstrated by Janine’s knowing laughter), therefore there appear to be levels of familiarity within the group. There are also those, for example Selma, who were able to construct a working understanding of what the phrase could mean despite her unfamiliarity with the phrase used in context.

Furthermore, though many could explain what they thought was meant by ‘playing the game’ or ‘playing the Ofsted game’, there was arguably a wide range of thought as to what is meant by the phrase. It can define a geopolitical competition between countries, or it can define an attitude towards Ofsted inspections. It can be expressed by “senior leaders” as well as “class teachers” (Janine, 2024). While there were a range of responses given, it is worth stating that many of the student-teachers who were more familiar with the idea of ‘playing the game’ had more experience of working in schools than those who were less familiar.

This suggests that the tacit knowledge of ‘playing the game’ is not necessarily acquired during the ITTE training period but may be gained implicitly through exposure to the realities of teaching in schools. Metaphors can “contribute to the discursive mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from the political community” (Mottier, 2008: 192), so the tacit learning of the phrase may be seen as a hidden element of induction into the profession, not explicitly stated as ‘core content’ in the CCF for student-teachers to learn but potentially implied and acquired within practices and through immersion within professional cultures.

This is not to say that there is a sequence involved in acquiring this tacit knowledge during the training years, nor would this be easy to find out given that few interview participants could pinpoint specific times when they had heard the phrases used, or learned what ‘playing the game’ might mean. Neither is it an intention of this research project to try to identify such origins, rather the intention here is to understand the familiarity that student-teachers and teacher-educators might have with regard to the language of ‘playing the game’ in the context of educational practices.

This section has detailed a broad range of how these phrases are recognised, identified and conceptualised by different student-teachers. The next section focuses on interview responses given by teacher-educators.

9.2.2 Teacher-Educator Responses

As shown in the previous section, responses from student-teachers varied regarding questions of whether they recognised phrases related to 'playing the game' in the context of education, including for example, 'We must play the game' or 'We need to play the Ofsted game.' These responses ranged from no familiarity with the phrases at all, to some familiarity when prompted, to immediate recognition. Janine, for example, did not require any prompting and her laughter, as well as her given examples of senior leaders and class teachers using such language, suggests a strong familiarity with the idea of 'playing the game' in education.

Laughter also occurred during interviews with other participants. With some teacher-educators, laughter came in responses about 'playing the game.' But it also came at other moments when teacher-educators noticed their metaphorical language as they were using it, for example when Chloe describes an Ofsted inspection by stating "the first one, it was a guessing game [laughter]" (Chloe, 2023) or when Lisa describes forthcoming changes to ITTE practices in line with reforms following the implementation of the ITTMRR as "a whole new ball game and it's like *changing the goal posts again* [laughter]" (Lisa, 2023). Emphasis on "changing the goal posts" here indicates Lisa's intonation on these words, which demonstrates her recognition of her own metaphorical language use in action.

Laughter also occurs when teacher-educator Chloe describes her familiarity with the concept of 'playing the game' in education. She offers a personal narrative which she centres around "one of the reasons I left the classroom" (Chloe, 2023). Her narrative is presented here.

> I had an incident where a senior manager came to me with our […] writing marks… grades that we were giving to children and teacher assessments. And I had graded one child at the same level that had been passed on from her previous teacher. And she [pause] um… entered into quite an aggressive attack on my capability as a teacher. Because she was claiming that because I had levelled her at the same level, that this child hadn't made any improvements and my argument was that, yes, this child has clearly made great steps, and here is evidence of her writing from the beginning of the year and evidence from the end of the year (Chloe, 2023).

Chloe describes here a disagreement between herself and a senior leader. The disagreement centres around data, in this case a writing grade for a child. She goes on to suggest that the child's previous teacher had perhaps "been too generous with the levels" (Chloe, 2023). She continues her narrative:

> She was refusing to look at the child's work that I was basing my marks on […] Obviously, that was like the straw that broke the camel's back because it was an ongoing issue for a long time and it was something that most teachers that I spoke to about it disagreed with. But we were all, you know, playing this game [laughter], you know, being part of the coercive approach to keeping the government happy, keeping Ofsted happy (Chloe, 2023).

Chloe's laughter comes in her final sentence here following the words "playing this game" (Chloe, 2023). Laughter in interviews can demonstrate an "affiliation between people" (Grønnerød, 2004: 32), signify a sense of belonging, mutuality or "togetherness" (Grønnerød, 2004: 41), and it can manifest from "a clash between the real and the unreal" (Grønnerød, 2004: 35). Therefore, laughter can highlight a juxtaposition between expectations and reality.

During the interview, Chloe was seated at a table with games visible to her. She had been asked whether she could relate to the idea of 'playing the game' in the context of education and she articulates a deeply personal story that touches on her reasons for leaving classroom teaching, in which her authority as a teacher is questioned, and in which she feels aggressively criticised by a senior member of staff. To be clear, when Chloe laughs in the final line, it is not because her story is a humorous one. Laughter instead may come from a resonance to the idea of 'playing the game' as Chloe notices a juxtaposition between the ambitions and values of her professional stance and the reality of "being part of the coercive approach" (Chloe, 2023) to complying with DfE policy and the rules of Ofsted inspection.

My own insider status (Floyd and Arthur, 2012) may in-part add to the "affiliation" (Grønnerød, 2004: 32) felt between participants in this interview. As a graduate research teaching assistant (GRTA), I was a member of the Primary ITE department therefore mutuality could be related to my own position in the department. However, given the point at which laughter occurs, for Lisa as well as Chloe, it would seem reasonable to suggest that much of their laughter was due to the context of games and the familiarity of a phrase that was drawn from something unconscious or abstract into something concrete and conscious. In some ways, the relationship or affiliation we share is connected to the stimulus materials and the subject

matter. Put another way, Chloe and I relate to the idea of 'playing the game' and can relate to each other as a result through a shared language and shared understanding.

Additionally, while the words 'you know' are frequently used in conversation, it is nonetheless apparent in the final line of Chloe's narrative: "you know, playing this game [laughter], you know" (Chloe, 2023). The words under question and her laughter are bookended by a repeated "you know." Though presumably unintentional, this phrase carries some symbolic meaning given the context, as our affiliation is grounded on the fact that we recognise this conceptualisation of education as a game. We *know* it - I know it, Chloe knows it, and Chloe knows that I know it.

It is then a telling laugh, one that does not just suggest an "affiliation between people" (Grønnerød, 2004: 32), but the act of affiliating with another person. This is part of the power of the metaphor of 'playing the game.' It is an element of a social professional discourse that co-creates and constitutes a subcultural attitude amongst education practitioners. It says: I *know* that there is an educational 'game' being played, and I know that you know what I mean when I talk about 'playing the game.' It is therefore a phrase which can acculturate or bring others into this culture, into this mindset, or into this attitude. Given student-teacher Selma's response to my question, and her ability to work out its meaning for herself, the phrase requires little teaching. But it is no doubt learned, acquired and redistributed amongst professional practitioners.

Chloe was the first teacher-educator to be asked whether she knew of 'playing the game' in the context of education practices. Her answer reveals not only a familiarity but a strong personal and professional resonance towards the phrase. For Chloe, 'playing the game' involves a degree of pressure to perform and conform within a professional culture where senior leaders might refuse to look at a child's work but still expect data to show improvement as "part of the coercive approach to keeping the government happy, keeping Ofsted happy" (Chloe, 2023).

Chloe's narrative recollects one part of a larger picture. Another metaphor Chloe uses in her recollection is "the straw that broke the camel's back" (Chloe, 2023). The metaphor suggests that the encounter with a senior manager was part of a series of accumulated issues arising over time and reaching breaking point - a 'final straw' that Chloe could no longer tolerate. Chloe makes this explicit, in fact, stating "it was an ongoing issue for a long time" (Chloe, 2023). She adds "and it was something that most teachers that I spoke to about it disagreed with" (Chloe, 2023).

Like Chloe, teacher-educator Ethan relates the phrase initially to practices in schools.

> I think coming from the school environment as well, that's the language we used to use because you do see it as an abstract, like a slightly abstract, um, process that you have to go through in… in order to maintain being a school that can run, essentially (Ethan, 2023).

Ethan clearly recognises the notion of 'playing the game' and suggests it is rooted in school practices but has crossed over into ITTE and universities. Ethan then describes an attitude towards 'playing the game' in the context of schools which values 'playing' to survive rather than 'playing' to win. He compares Ofsted's former grading criteria of 'Good' and 'Outstanding' ratings for schools and his own personal and professional philosophy of striving for a 'Good' rather than an 'Outstanding' grade.

> Not that we were ever gonna get an 'Outstanding', but we didn't want one because it was… it was too much. You were diverting too much time and energy into things you didn't feel were what your main core purpose was […] So if you got a 'Good' that was all right (Ethan, 2023).

Ethan then applies this idea to his position in ITTE, stating that he would not necessarily want to strive for the top grade and adding, "I'd just be happy to have a 'Good' and that means we've got through the process" (Ethan, 2023). Responding to Ethan, teacher-educator Sara relates the concept of games to the idea of rules.

> Certain games have rules. And in Ofsted there's a kind of a criteria and what you're trying to do is play the game in terms of, "So have we ticked off that criteria?" And we've all seen it, haven't we? We're underlining it literally as we go through. "Yes, we've got that and we've got evidence of this. Are we matching that criteria?" (Sara, 2023).

With these words, Sara describes a tick-box approach to quality control within ITTE organisations. Her question, "we've all seen it, haven't we?" stands as another example of affiliation between members of a professional culture. In the same way that Chloe resonates with the idea of 'playing the game', Sara highlights a collective knowledge and accepted cultural practice in terms of how quality can be assessed. A superficial approach like this might not be what practitioners necessarily believe is a strong approach, but it is an element of

‘playing the game’ and therefore a practice which, like the dominance of ILSA league table rankings, “seems inexorable” (Burdett and O’Donnell, 2016: 116).

The purpose of this section has been to demonstrate teacher-educator responses to questions asked about phrases centred around the idea of ‘playing the game.’ A range of responses have been described, including troubling narratives and discourses. The following sections move away from questions about recognition to consider connotations of words like ‘play’ and ‘game’ and the ways in which such words can be understood, the discursive powers that they can hold, and the effects which they can produce.

9.3 A Spoonful of Sugar

> In every job that must be done
>
> There is an element of fun
>
> You find the fun and snap!
>
> The job’s a game
>
> (Julie Andrews, 1964).

The song lyrics quoted here are from the 1964 musical film *Mary Poppins* starring Julie Andrews as the eponymous nanny. They are the opening words to a song in which the newly recruited Mary Poppins tries to convince two children in her care, Jane and Michael, to tidy their room. The song’s chorus returns to a metaphorical justification for bringing an “element of fun” to mundane or difficult work: “A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down” (Andrews, 1964). It is important when discussing the metaphorical phrase of ‘playing the game’ to give some focus to a suggested “element of fun” and consider further the relationship between games and fun.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, teacher-educator Lisa suggests in an interview that the language of games can articulate ideas amongst practitioners as they are “like easy cultural references” (Lisa, 2023). She explains that metaphors and similes offer shared understanding so they can help relate ideas more easily to an audience. In reference to the phrase ‘moving the goalposts’, she says: “You know what a goalpost is… You know those sorts of things” (Lisa, 2023). She expands the frame of meaning to include “those sorts of things” we associate with games, for example concrete things like ‘playing fields’ as well as ‘goalposts.’

In response to the question of why this language might be used, she answers that “games are universal because you play with them from childhood” (Lisa, 2023). Lisa emphasises an important aspect of the metaphorical conceptual framework that likens educational practices to games. Not only does she describe them as “easy cultural references” (Lisa, 2023), but also as “universal” (Lisa, 2023). The suggested universality of these metaphors makes them easily relatable. Lisa in fact uses the word “easy” (Lisa, 2023) in describing them as “cultural references” (Lisa, 2023), indicating that they can serve to explain ideas more easily to an audience, including student-teachers. In this sense, it is important not only to describe metaphors as rhetorical tools but also as pedagogical ones. That is to say that metaphors can encode politically persuasive ideas, but they may also act as a part of a teacher-educators repertoire, as a method for transmitting knowledge more ‘easily’ from teacher to learner.

Lisa suggests that phrases like ‘moving the goalposts’ and ‘jumping through hoops’ are easily relatable and so can express a point to another person with little difficulty. For example, it is perhaps easier to tell a student-teacher that they need to ‘jump through hoops’ on their way to becoming qualified, rather than telling them explicitly that there may be some elements of their course or their placement practice which seem superfluous, excessive or performative. The metaphor of ‘jumping through hoops’ offers an “easy” (Lisa, 2023) shorthand for teacher-educators communicating potentially difficult, conflictual or dissonant ideas to student-teachers.

Lisa does not only state that games-related language is universal but offers an explanation as to why: “because you play with them from childhood” (Lisa, 2023). Lisa makes an important point, and it is one worth consideration, not least because the example of Mary Poppins’ song lyrics suggests a similar connotation – that games are highly relatable to the extent of being classed as universal. They clearly have an appeal to the children Jane and Michael, who clean their room as a result of their nanny’s song and its message. It is clear too, that despite Mary’s evident magical powers throughout the film, it is the power of her persuasive – largely metaphorical – song and its lyrics that has the effect of convincing the children.

During my research interviews, Lisa is not the only participant to consider the connotations of games-related metaphors as stemming from childhood. Student-teacher Sophie makes the following point, which also links the metaphor of ‘playing the game’ to childhood. She states that as a teacher,

> You can use games to teach children […] and it's probably come from that. And it makes it so that… It just makes it that it doesn't sound so stressful also. If you say like, "I've got to follow the rules," it sounds really like hard work. But "I've got to play the game," it doesn't sound quite dramatic or as bad (Sophie, 2024).

Sophie suggests that the language of games can frame compliance in positive terms. She states that comparing work to a game makes it appear less "stressful" and not "like hard work" (Sophie, 2024). There is only a small semantic shift from her first example, "'I've got to follow the rules'" to her second example, "'I've got to play the game'" (Sophie, 2024). In fact, only two of the words change from the first example to the second. The verb 'follow' transposes to 'play' in the second example whilst the noun 'rules' transposes to 'game.' Sophie's translation from negative to positive connotations is therefore only slight, but it makes a powerful difference in presenting work involving compliance and conformity as something that can be potentially enjoyable.

As Mary Poppins suggests in her attempt to persuade the children in her care: "You find the fun and snap! / The job's a game" (Andrews, 1964). Although it should be said that Sophie's interpretation is the reverse of Mary Poppins' words in that firstly, the job is presented as like a game and then as a result, fun or enthusiasm for the job will follow – or so is the suggestion. In this sense, Sophie indicates something of a euphemistic quality to the idea of 'playing the game'. A euphemism can stand in for words that appear harsh or unwanted to make them more palatable. This is exactly Mary Poppins' approach, shown by her chorus which describes "a spoonful of sugar" (Andrews, 1964) as something sweet to help the harsh "medicine go down" (Andrews, 1964). Taking Sophie's interpretation, we can then say that the metaphor of 'playing the game' has the effect of 'sweetening' the potentially harsh reality of enacting potentially unpalatable education policy, or perhaps even of 'sugarcoating' an encouragement to 'cheat' at the 'game' – that is to fabricate or otherwise coerce others into fabricating pupils' data in order to meet the demands of a high-stakes performance culture.

Both Chloe and Sophie highlight the words 'play' and 'game' and offer ways in which this language might have an impact on practitioners. Yet despite the palatability offered by such wording, it is clear from other language elements of these phrases that there is little choice as to whether practitioners may take part or not. Using Sophie's examples "I've got to follow the rules" and "I've got to play the game" (Sophie, 2024), what stays the same in both are the words 'I've got to.' Like the modal verb 'must', 'I've got to' or 'I have got to' expresses an obligation which must be upheld.

An inherent effect of coercion becomes more apparent in these phrases if words such as ‘must’ or ‘have to’ are replaced with modal verbs of possibility rather than necessity. For example, it is unusual to hear practitioners say, ‘We *can* play the game’ or ‘We *may* play the game.’ This implies then, though Lisa and Sophie might hint towards some implied level of ‘fun’ in the game metaphor, participation is nonetheless mandatory. Arguably, this inability to opt out makes the game not a game at all, as ‘players’ have no choice in their participation. The only choices then are the permitted ‘moves’ on an increasingly limited field. The words ‘must’ and ‘have to’ then offer a crucial distinction between work and a game. The only ‘play’ is that which centres around a participant’s level of choice in their given context of work.

Returning for a final time to Sophie’s examples, she uses the first-person pronoun ‘I’ in her phrases: “I’ve got to follow the rules” and “I’ve got to play the game” (Sophie, 2024). This stands out somewhat from familiar uses of ‘play the game’ phrases, which commonly begin with the plural pronoun ‘we’ instead. This is another element of ‘playing the game’ phrases that requires further contemplation. The typical use of the word ‘we’ in the phrases ‘We have to play the game’ and ‘We must play the game’ can indicate that there is a collective or sociocultural element to the phrase and to its effects. It is a phrase which forms and constructs connections between colleagues and can be legitimised further, supported and strengthened by incorporating practitioners together through its own mutuality.

In summary, while Lisa suggests associations to childhood and universality, thereby making the notion of ‘playing the game’ easily transmitted between practitioners (including new practitioners like student-teachers), Sophie adds that these connotations can frame obeying rules as positive. There are certainly enjoyable elements to classroom teaching, likewise in the work that teacher-educators do in ITTE. But the euphemistic qualities of these phrases suggest a subtext of cynical compliance in specific contexts, for example regarding inspection and the presentation of examination data. Furthermore, modal verbs like ‘must’ frame ‘playing the game’ as an obligation rather than a choice. Despite any euphemistic language which may suggest fun and enjoyment, the metaphor of ‘playing the game’ is often hidden in clandestine or surreptitious conversations between colleagues. This is likely because the “element of fun” (Andrews, 1964) is a façade and ‘playing the game’ is rather “something that most teachers” (Chloe, 2023) disagree with.

Much of the previous section of this chapter has explored the way in which ideas around ‘playing the game’ can be understood as a shared but surreptitious knowledge between practitioners. The word ‘we’ supports how such ideas are part of a sociocultural professional

affiliation. The language is used and reused as set phrases which Orwell would call "prefabricated" (Orwell, 1960: 156). Such language is that "in which commonly made associations are reiterated, not challenged" (Jones and Wareing, 1999: 39). The effect of such metaphorical discourse potentially provokes a collective professional obligation to specific work in educational contexts. This often unpalatable and unchallenged work becomes sugar-coated through more palatable words like 'play' and 'game' in order to legitimise the work itself, which can include practices of coercion, performative approaches towards inspection, as well as manipulation of systems, rules and data to create the appearance of quality teaching and quality education.

9.4 The Gaze of Ofsted

Teacher-educator James offers reasons as to why the language of games, particularly the metaphor of 'playing the game,' is used by practitioners.

> I think what we're talking about when we use that language is we don't actually agree with the rules of the game. And we don't see them as valuable. But we need to play that game in order to do the things that we want to do (James, 2023).

James makes the point that there is disagreement with "the rules of the game" (James, 2023). Chloe uses similar language related to disagreement in her narrative detailing her reasons for leaving classroom teaching. She states that an accumulation of issues built towards her feelings of wanting to leave, but the "straw that broke the camel's back" (Chloe, 2023) was a particular incident in which a senior leader questioned her capability as a teacher. This has been discussed earlier in this chapter (see 9.2.2), but it is worth repeating here that the incident she describes was a part of "something that most teachers that I spoke to about it disagreed with" (Chloe, 2023). 'Playing the game' according to both Chloe and James' then expresses disagreement with the rules that must nonetheless be followed.

Both Chloe and James highlight that 'playing the game' is done despite a lack of agreement "with the rules of the game" (James, 2023). James is reminded of a quotation which he credits to Professor Mick Waters:

> He said, "You have to throw pepper in Ofsted's eyes whilst you got on with the good stuff." And I thought that… Again, it's just like you, kind of, you've gotta fulfil the expectations of these law-making bodies because otherwise they'll… they'll stop you from doing what you need to do […] We know the

> rules. It's their rules. As long as you play by their rules, you're OK. And then you can do other stuff as well (James, 2023).

While both James and Chloe's responses share common ground in terms of highlighting how there is largely a broad consensus that most teachers – and teacher-educators – may disagree with aspects of their roles and duties, their ideas about how this 'game' plays out differ somewhat.

James largely relates the 'game' to something like a deception which takes place roughly during the inspection period which is undertaken by Ofsted inspectors. Using Professor Waters' analogy, the task of 'the game' is to "'throw pepper'" (James, 2023) into the eyes of Ofsted. This idea employs a metaphor to suggest that Ofsted can be blinded, distracted or deceived as to what is really going on within a school or ITTE provider. It suggests a superficial element to inspection, that much of it is a charade or a show to present the school or university in the way that they believe will meet Ofsted's inspection criteria.

There is an element of personification in the analogy 'You have to throw pepper in Ofsted's eyes,' in the suggestion that it is not necessarily the inspectors' eyes that are the target, but that the Ofsted inspectorate as a whole has eyes which are the target. James conceptualises the gaze of Ofsted in terms of a single entity that inspects via surveillance, but that this entity can be fooled for a short time until it eventually leaves and turns its gaze elsewhere. James suggests that the surveillance period eventually comes to an end, after which a school or ITTE provider can continue their practice as usual and therefore resume "'the good stuff'" (James, 2023).

Chloe's narrative displays a different sort of 'game' and, in doing so, conceptualises a different form of Ofsted's surveillance to James. Ofsted inspections are stressful, high-stakes, and rare occasions. Chloe does not describe an Ofsted inspection, yet the 'gaze' of Ofsted – or the threat of its power – lingers in her narrative. She describes how a senior leader was eager to improve the data produced by a child's work. Importantly, it was not improving the child's education or writing ability that mattered as the senior leader refused "to look at the child's work" (Chloe, 2023). A performative drive to make data which looks the part appears to be the central focus. When this data is not at the level that Ofsted might expect, the senior leader enters into an "aggressive attack" (Chloe, 2023) on Chloe's professional capability. This is fuelled by the demands of inspection in which "coercive" (Chloe, 2023) approaches might be taken to meet the expectations of Ofsted and the DfE.

While James describes Ofsted as a power that is embodied and personified, Chloe describes a power that is disembodied and diffuse. In this sense, the power of Ofsted is far from something which may be distracted, deceived and fooled for the time-being but a power that can exist in the minutiae of everyday practice. That is to say that the gaze of Ofsted never quite goes away, but exists within schools, universities, placements and beyond. It can operate within and from leaders, mentors (and now 'lead mentors') and colleagues. It can exist within ourselves as practitioners. In other words, while some like James might suggest that 'playing the game' is a shorthand for a short-term phenomenon, as something which comes with the territory of an Ofsted inspection and recedes once visitors have hopefully been suitably pleased and vanquished for a time, the real power of 'the game' exists far beyond the inspection period and can manifest at any time when we might otherwise feel safe from its gaze.

To 'play the game' is not necessarily a fixed moment, although it can be. One might 'play the game' in order to perform the correct techniques required in a lesson observation, or boost the grade of a child's exam result to show school data in a better light. In this sense, professionals might successfully 'throw pepper in Ofsted's eyes' for a time. But in another sense the 'game' is inescapable and inexorable, constantly being played, yet with an "irregular" (Foucault, 1977: 207) consistency that always carries the possibility and the threat of surveillance. Games are not merely played to deceive an inspectorate, but play is maintained and sustained in everyday practices through hierarchical power relations that assure "the capillary functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977: 198). Not only is the game obligatory then, it is also seemingly never-ending with the panoptic 'gaze' of Ofsted being in and around the entire ecosystem of school teaching, ITTE placements, and universities.

9.5 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has demonstrated how the metaphor of 'the game' constitutes a particular attitude within professional educational cultures and contexts. In schools as in ITTE, it may present itself as an attitude of defiance against imposed rules that practitioners disagree with. Professionals accept an obligation to adhere to rules despite potential dissonance with their personal values. Despite their disagreement, such attitudes can arguably be subsumed by a strict imperative for compliance and conformity. In both schools and ITTE then, much of the language of 'playing the game' acts as an attitude of cynical compliance towards policy from the DfE and the inspectorate Ofsted.

This chapter has demonstrated that not all participants interviewed were aware of phrases and metaphors related to 'playing the game.' For teacher-educators, the phrase was instantly recognisable. This was also the case for some student-teachers, for example Janine, who suggested that she had heard the phrase said by senior leaders as well as classroom teachers. Her recognition is supported by a knowing laugh much like teacher-educators Chloe and Lisa. However, some student-teachers were not aware of the phrase at all, while others had something of a peripheral knowledge, for example Karim, Zahra and Selma. While Karim and Zahra come to realise that they have heard the metaphor used in context before, Selma actively constructs meaning for herself while drawing on her prior knowledge of International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs).

This peripheral knowledge that Karim, Zahra and Selma present demonstrates ways in which the metaphor of 'the game' may become conceptualised, acquired tacitly, and subsequently become part of a professional identity. There is no fixed point in a student-teacher's training experience in which they come to acquire knowledge of the metaphor and its various connotations, but it is likely learned at some unknown point during the process of teacher induction or perhaps some years into professional practice. Nevertheless, knowledge of 'playing the game' and associated phrases is arguably akin to a hidden qualification gained via a hidden curriculum – that is the norms, values and beliefs conveyed in the social environment of ITTE and a teacher's early career – recognisable to others with a similar 'qualification' and passed on through various professional channels of discourse.

There are of course wide conceptual variations in responses to 'playing the game' metaphors, from Selma's association made with ILSAs and international league table rankings, to a more common association to Ofsted inspection (for example Janine, Zahra, James etc). There are levels in which 'the game' might be played. There is an international level, in which political leaders attempt to achieve better ILSA rankings through national policy reforms. There is a national level in which schools compete with one another in national league tables. With new market reforms and rules for accreditation comes a potential for new 'games' to be 'played' between universities and ITTE providers. The 'game' may even be played at the school level, for example by "senior leaders" as well as "class teachers" (Janine, 2024). The political rationality of a logic of competition operates at each level, with countries pitted against countries, universities against universities, and schools against schools – all in the name of a 'quality' education system.

This neoliberal logic of competition suggests that education systems might improve at these multiple levels. But often, practitioners are not playing to win. They are only playing because

they have no other choice. For some, like teacher-educator Ethan whose marker of success is not to be a winner but to simply get “through the process” (Ethan, 2023), it is rather about survival. Much of the process of re-accreditation and the threat of de-accreditation (see 2.2.2) is present here. Once again, the risks and hazards of a political rationality which follow a neoliberal logic of competition are apparent. These risks and hazards are somewhat obscured in the “sheer cloudy vagueness” (Orwell, 1960: 153) of the metaphorical concept of ‘playing the game’ language which largely sugarcoats the harsh, threatening and often cognitively dissonant work that student-teachers and teacher-educators engage in.

The effects of such metaphorical justifications for practices are widespread and troubling. Essentially, the power of the metaphor of ‘playing the game’ is in its ability to make practitioners powerless. “Worn-out metaphors” (Nietzsche, 1873: 180) have a power in their seeming powerlessness; in their ability to conceal themselves in plain sight. They become part of the everyday mundane language we use, and they come to constitute that which can define our professional practices. They can stand as sugar-coated euphemisms for some of the most difficult challenges we face. It is a difficult yet important task for professionals to recognise their worn-out metaphors – “to make appear what is so close, so immediate, so intimately connected with ourselves that we cannot perceive it” (Foucault, 2018: 12).

The next chapter concludes my analysis of interviews with student-teachers and teacher-educators. It further considers metaphorical language evident in discourses and practices related to policy reforms in ITTE and the effects of such discourses and practices.

Chapter 10: Levelling the Playing Field

10.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the primary data analysis began in chapter eight and continued in chapter nine. Chapter eight has reflected upon metaphors of resilience and survival, such as 'make or break' and 'sink or swim', as well as the language of luck and chance. Chapter nine has focused on metaphors of 'playing the game' and what this means to student-teachers and teacher-educators in ITTE today. Concluding the primary data analysis, this chapter focuses on interview data to consider the metaphorical phrase 'levelling the playing field' and its use in educational discourses today. Like 'playing the game', this phrase employs the language of games and competition. But while 'playing the game' suggests a cynical compliance towards policy priorities and quality measures, 'levelling the playing field' uses the language of games to conceptualise disadvantages or barriers and suggests equalising conditions to create a fairer education system.

Despite these differences, both 'playing the game' and 'levelling the playing field' centre around a common premise that quality of teaching can support children classed as 'disadvantaged.' For example, 'playing the game' phrases may relate to inspection and quality assurance. Relatedly, 'levelling the playing field' is a phrase that implies creating conditions for fairness, often used in relation to perceptions of addressing attainment gaps and educational inequalities between 'disadvantaged' children and their peers. Therefore, the phrases not only relate in terms of their metaphorical grounding in the language of games, but they also connect through their connotations of 'quality' in education. Specifically, these metaphorical phrases can be related to the common premise problematised throughout this thesis, that:

> The quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for pupils – and it is particularly important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (DfE, 2019a: 3).

The previous chapter began with a description of how student-teachers and teacher-educators' variously recognised 'playing the game' metaphors. This chapter begins with a similar discussion before considering some of the ways in which quality, equality, disadvantage, and competition can be interpreted and conceptualised in education and in ITTE. As with previous chapters, I focus on metaphorical language use with attention to meaning, identity and power considering not only meaning of words and phrases, but the identities produced and actions performed (Mottier, 2008).

10.2 Conceptualisations of Equality

As stated in the previous chapter, not all student-teachers recognised phrases centred around 'playing the game.' Student-teacher Amira indicated that she had not come across the phrase but was familiar with the 'levelling the playing field' phrase. Another student-teacher, Ella, was also unfamiliar with the 'playing the game' metaphor but added "I've definitely heard some of these other ones though. 'Levelling the playing field', 'moving the goalposts'… Definitely heard more of those" (Ella, 2024). This can indicate a higher level of familiarity with the phrase 'levelling the playing field' in comparison to 'playing the game.'

However, this was not always the case. While student-teacher Lina showed familiarity with the 'playing the game' metaphor, she did not recognise the phrase 'levelling the playing field.' Despite this lack of familiarity, she articulated the thought that some metaphorical language, including the phrase 'levelling the playing field,' might serve to obscure one's opinion. Lina states that practitioners possibly use such language because they do not want to "be tied down to an opinion that they have, so they try and, I guess, hide it a bit with this cryptic sort of language" (Lina, 2024). She adds that practitioners might think: "I should keep my language very controlled" (Lina, 2024). Lina suggests that metaphors can obscure the truth of what one really thinks or believes with their "cryptic sort of language" (Lina, 2024).

Metaphors may then have broad appeal but encapsulate a range of meanings between speakers and audiences which may not always be congruent with one another. This section will begin to explore conceptual variability in the responses given by interview participants to questions around the metaphor of 'levelling the playing field.' Aside from Lina, no other participants indicated that they were unfamiliar with the phrase. Responses will be outlined and explored throughout, with a focus on the connotations that the phrase 'levelling the playing field' can offer and the various conceptualisations that emerge in responses from interview participants.

'Levelling the playing field' is indicative of other games-related language. But despite its possible similarities to metaphorical phrases explored in previous chapters, there are notable differences to explore. Aside from Lina, student-teachers were more likely to recognise the phrase compared with 'playing the game' phrases. This is perhaps to be expected. 'We have to play the Ofsted game' is highly contextual and, despite any connotations of fun and enjoyment that may come associated with play and games, captures an ultimately cynical attitude towards education practices that may appear to be deceitful, performative, or dissonant with practitioners' core values. As a result, the phrases related to 'playing the game'

are often used informally, even in clandestine or surreptitious ways between knowing colleagues.

Conversely, ‘levelling the playing field’ is used more broadly and in a range of contexts or phrasings, such as ‘level the playing field’, ‘level the educational playing field’ or related ideas that describe an ‘unequal playing field.’ While metaphors of ‘playing the game’ might typically be used informally between colleagues, ‘levelling the playing field’ and related phrases can be found in a broad range of publications, for example in government-commissioned reports (Donnelly et al., 2019) as well as Department for Education blog posts (DfE, 2022b). It is used by government institutions as well as in publications by the OECD (Young, 2022), books about education by researchers and teachers (Major and Briant, 2023), reports from think tanks (Centre for Social Justice, 2021), and commentary from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2025).

In comparison to ‘playing the game’, the idea of ‘levelling the playing field’ may also carry more positive connotations as it can resonate with moral values concerning social mobility and justice. Interview participants relate the ‘level’ element of the phrase to words like ‘equal’ or ‘even’ in their responses. For example, student-teacher Sophie responds that to ‘level the playing field’ is to make things “even for everybody so that everyone’s got the same opportunities and same chance to excel” (Sophie, 2024). Student-teacher Amira suggests, “it’s trying to get everyone on the same, like, equal level” (Amira, 2024) but adds:

> I guess for like statistics purposes, so that it doesn’t show that big gap between the higher ability students that can work, um, at a different level (Amira, 2024).

Responding after Amira, Grace states:

> From a teaching point of view as well it’s the equity of adapting that teaching. So, if you give all the children the equal playing field of, like, fairness-wise, not exactly all the same work, but so those children can access that learning, it keeps it level in terms of progress as well (Grace, 2024).

Amira offers the example of a lesson on multiplication to complement Grace’s concept of ‘levelling the playing field’ adding that a child in a Year 2 class might be working at “say Year 1 level, while the Year 2s are working at their Year 2 level. But still, you’re still doing the same topic” (Amira, 2024). Grace agrees and Amira adds: “So that they’re not that far behind […] but still they’re still doing the same things, everything, every lesson” (Amira, 2024).

Similarities are evident in these responses from student-teachers, but there is arguably wide variability to consider too. While Sophie uses the word ‘even’ which is synonymous with the word ‘level,’ she relates this to ensuring “that everyone’s got the same opportunities and same chance to excel” (Sophie, 2024). Sophie’s conceptualisation is rooted in the language of opportunity and therefore it may be more aligned with a position of equality of opportunity, which can be seen as distinct from equality of outcome (Elford, 2023).

Amira’s response initially uses similar language to Sophie when she talks about getting students to an “equal level” (Amira, 2024). Following this Amira then considers the “statistics purposes” (Amira, 2024) of creating a ‘level playing field’ and concentrating on how educators can avoid showing “that big gap” (Amira, 2024) between student outcomes. So, while Sophie may be conceptualising equality in terms of opportunity, Amira’s consideration might be seen as more related to outcomes. Yet, there is also an element of performativity (Lyotard, 1984) to consider in her language use here, as the gap between higher-achieving and lower-achieving students is on “show” (Amira, 2024). It is seemingly the visibility of “that big gap” (Amira, 2024) that can be perceived as the problem, rather than what that ‘gap’ represents and how it impacts on children’s education.

This is not to oversimplify Sophie and Amira’s responses as opposed, nor to suggest that opportunities and outcomes are so distinct as to be incongruous with one another. But it does suggest a potential breadth to the concept of ‘levelling the playing field,’ one that can seemingly encompass many stances on what we mean by fairness and what socially just education might involve. Despite potential tensions or vagueness, we may nonetheless begin to see here how broad appeal may serve to make the metaphor attractive, popular and prevalent.

Another student-teacher, Karim, says of ‘levelling the playing field’: “it means bring everyone to the same level” (Karim, 2024). As he elaborates further, he outlines some potentially conflicting notions of fairness:

> Or bring everyone… So, take away everyone’s, um… strengths and weaknesses. Give them all... Basically, give them all… Put them all at the same level. Do not treat them any differently. Do not… do not expect them to do anything differently. Just make sure that they are all at the same level (Karim, 2024).

Karim suggests that to 'level the playing field' involves equalising in terms of taking away "strengths and weaknesses" (Karim, 2024), not treating students "any differently" (Karim, 2024), nor expecting "them to do anything differently" (Karim, 2024). Karim's idea of keeping everyone at the same level is to avoid treating anyone differently but still to "put them all at the same level" and "just make sure that they are all at the same level" (Karim, 2024). In comparison to Sophie's example of equality of opportunity, of giving students the "same chance to excel" (Sophie, 2024), Karim's wording involves limiting students by not treating "them any differently" nor expecting "them to do anything differently" (Karim, 2024).

After offering his ideas of what 'levelling the playing field' means to him, Karim adds "I don't think – as a trainee teacher – you can level the playing field" (Karim, 2024). He reasons that "every child has different needs […] And as a teacher we've got to adapt to those needs" (Karim, 2024). Karim concludes:

> I know it's a bit tricky to level the playing field, but as a teacher we can't. As a trainee teacher, I can't. I can't level the playing field, because I've got to take everyone into account (Karim, 2024).

Given these initial examples, the phrase 'levelling the playing field' appears to be something of a vague term, which encapsulates an abstract notion of social justice and fairness but can be conflictual or even contradictory when individuals elaborate on its meaning. The phrase is symbolic of equality, but ideas of equality and fairness have broad personal and political differences amongst practitioners and therefore the ways that these ideas can play out in practice may be problematic or dissonant with one's values system. In Karim's exploration of these potentially dissonant meanings, he ultimately finds himself in a "tricky" (Karim, 2024) position, in which navigating multiple meanings of fairness and equality makes him resign to a potential inability to affect change on a larger scale, despite seemingly having accountability for doing so in his intended role as a classroom teacher.

As well as a focus on the 'level' element of the phrase 'levelling the playing field', some student-teachers considered 'the playing field' itself. For example, student-teacher Ella suggests that to 'level the playing field' is to create "that kind of environment that allows everyone to thrive" (Ella, 2024). Ella prioritises a focus on "the entire class" while,

> Making sure that all abilities are accounted for, and they are all supported, and are given an opportunity to succeed […] It's about having a playing field where they can succeed (Ella, 2024).

Ella highlights the ‘playing field’ itself here and stresses the importance of the “environment” (Ella, 2024) on opportunities and outcomes. But to what extent is a ‘playing field’ an adequate description of educational environments? And what effects might such a description have on practices relating to social justice in education?

A ‘playing field’ denotes a “large area of ground where sports are played” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, playing field entry). However, various dictionary entries reveal a range of contextual meanings and applications too. In terms of American dictionary entries, this includes a place for sports, especially “one that is marked with lines for playing a sport” as well as simply “a situation where there is competition” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, playing field entry). Definitions become increasingly vague, with Business English entries defining a ‘playing field’ simply as “a particular type of situation” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025, playing field entry).

As stated in chapter three (see section 3.2), the origins of the ‘level playing field’ concept can be traced to a metaphor for “competitive equality” (The American Banker, 1979) in banking. Therefore, its complex connotations are formed in part by American cultural norms, sports terminology, as well as an expression of fairness in a business context. While these definitions may become increasingly vague, they still demonstrate the influence of American corporate cultures and attitudes on English language use, as well as concepts of social justice and related educational practices which are produced and legitimised by such language use.

Major and Briant (2023) indicate further American influences on concepts of fairness in England.

> Politicians in England and other countries have increasingly focused on the narrow but powerful narrative of the American dream: the idea that any child, irrespective of their background, should be able to strive to better their lives. Somewhere along the line, that dream got bastardised into a highly individualistic ideal: that anyone can get to the top, get rich or get famous, escaping the place and background they come from as long as they try hard enough (Major and Briant, 2023: 27).

The influence of this ‘American dream’ is apparent in stories, personal narratives, biographies, documentaries, films, music – it is a cultural idea that can legitimise and justify economic inequalities, and it is undoubtedly “powerful” as Major and Briant suggest. They go on to show

how it pervades popular culture in England today, with high profile game shows portraying the values of this particular mindset:

> This dream permeates throughout popular culture, promoted on popular TV shows such as *The X Factor* or *The Apprentice*, promising to pluck talent from nowhere. The assumption is that the winner takes all and their lives will be complete if they make it to a better place. Everyone else is left behind (Major and Briant, 2023: 27).

'Levelling the playing field' is by no means a simple term then. It involves a constellation of ideas influenced by American corporate cultural norms for talking about business and social mobility in terms of professional sports and a 'dream' that "anyone can get to the top" (Major and Briant, 2023: 27). This American influence is not only aimed towards the context of England's education system as it pervades OECD discourses (Young, 2022), therefore has broad international reach. Nor is this American cultural influence only limited to this concept as the prominent language of 'coaching' which is often seen as distinct yet in relation to mentoring (Oberholzer and Lofthouse, 2023) also has roots in American sports terminology and practices, with greater technical 'performance' an implied outcome.

It seems the language of sports and performance are never far from education today. Notions of quality education come with sociocultural ideas of how such 'quality' can be achieved, supported by a neoliberal logic of competition and expressed through this language of games. Although games, sports and competitions can often involve teams, cooperation and collaboration, it is important to state that the concepts of equality which come from the metaphor of 'levelling the playing field' can be highly individualistic. The following section will explore this idea further.

10.3 Equality, Quality and Competition

Teacher-educator Lisa describes 'disadvantage' as a "loaded term" (Lisa, 2023). She questions its potentially vague conceptualisation and suggests that any child could face disadvantages such as "neglect" (Lisa, 2023) regardless of their socioeconomic background. Lisa also highlights the seemingly arbitrary coverage of pupil premium allocations, stating "now some people who would not qualify for free school meals have parents who are having to use food banks" (Lisa, 2023). She questions whether the criteria for pupil premium can "adequately cover disadvantage" (Lisa, 2023) adding that "the cost-of-living crisis has changed the… the playing field [laughter] has changed the… the landscape" (Lisa, 2023).

Lisa suggests that ‘disadvantage’ is a problematic term as it can be broadly applied to children beyond specific socioeconomic categorisations. Lisa also highlights how fluctuating economic conditions and inequalities can add further complexity to definitions of who counts as ‘disadvantaged’ and who does not. In drawing on the metaphor of the ‘playing field’, Lisa laughs. As outlined in the previous chapter (see section 9.2.2), this can be a response to a “clash between the real and the unreal” (Grønnerød, 2004: 35) as well as demonstrate “togetherness” (Grønnerød, 2004: 41) or a mutual, shared knowledge. In this case, the metaphors (e.g. education as a ‘game’) and keywords (‘disadvantaged’) under investigation are brought out, revealed and recognised.

A clash or juxtaposition is also evident, particularly regarding the concept of a playing field which has now been “changed” (Lisa, 2023) due to the economic instability of a “cost-of-living crisis” (Lisa, 2023). Such an idea demonstrates how the ‘playing field’ metaphor cannot adequately portray the complexities of reality. Such an image of a ‘playing field’ in which shifting land or ‘moving goalposts’ interfere with play is clearly not a suitable playing field for any real competition to take place. Lisa perhaps realises that the abstract notion of the ‘playing field’ does not fit the concrete reality and complexities of disadvantage. Through questioning the metaphor, it begins to unravel and become “unreal” (Grønnerød, 2004: 35) or at least may no longer fully capture a notion of social justice with applicability to the real world and to real events. Lisa demonstrates that the metaphor is perhaps unhelpful or vague when she changes her words from “the playing field” to “the landscape” (Lisa, 2023).

Lisa illuminates an important idea within the conceptualisation of education as a ‘playing field’ which the metaphor itself can disguise. There is no such fixed, static ‘playing field’ as the phrase suggests, but an everchanging and uncertain milieu. Advantages and disadvantages are not merely distinct binaries but always shifting in relation to the other. In a relative conception of education as a game, advantage and disadvantage can seem like directly opposed concepts. In reality, advantage and disadvantage interact and define one another in a constant state of flux.

Like Lisa, researchers Major and Briant also describe ‘disadvantaged pupils’ as a “loaded term” as it “immediately focuses on pupils as individuals rather than the circumstances they face” (Major and Briant, 2023: 11). In fact, Major and Briant highlight a connection between ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘pupils’ with these words. Today, ‘disadvantaged pupils’ is the common term used in policy and discourse. However, even in the relatively short time in which the term ‘disadvantage’ has gained political prominence, a general trajectory from a focus on

‘disadvantaged schools’ or ‘disadvantaged areas’ (e.g. Kendall et al., 1999) towards the individualistic ‘disadvantaged pupils’ is evident.

Not only is there broad conceptual variability when it comes to defining ‘disadvantage’, there is potential confusion between considerations of ‘disadvantaged’ areas, schools or individual pupils. ‘Disadvantaged’ as used in ITTE policy today is typically used in reference to ‘pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds’ or ‘disadvantaged pupils’ (DfE, 2019a; DfE, 2024a), although there are some traces of a policy focus on ‘disadvantaged areas’ with references made to ‘disadvantaged communities’ in the ITTMRR. It is worth noting however that the proposed support in this case is specific to school-based placements:

> Trainees’ placements could include time in schools serving disadvantaged communities, or a focused period teaching pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (DfE, 2021b: 52).

This extract from the ITTMRR suggests that quality education for children classed as ‘disadvantaged’ has perhaps not moved all that far from Bell’s preference towards school-based learning, that of “attending the school, seeing what is going on there, and taking a share in the office of tuition” (Meiklejohn, 1881: 43) rather than any theoretical learning beyond that. Again, this idea is situated within the same logical framework that undergirds the premise that “quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in improving outcomes” (DfE, 2019a: 3) for children classed as ‘disadvantaged’. It is an idea that turns focus away from societal causes of socioeconomic and educational inequality and towards teachers and teaching as the solution to this complex and entrenched problem.

The metaphor of ‘levelling the playing field’ and related concepts of ‘disadvantage’ are therefore identity-forming. Despite a large amount of complexity, ‘disadvantage’ is reduced to a binary distinction based on socioeconomic factors of free school meals eligibility and looked after status (DfE, 2025a). This simplifies, segregates and classifies individuals as ‘disadvantaged’ whether they are genuinely at a disadvantage or not, or whether they want to be labelled ‘disadvantaged’ or not. The metaphor therefore establishes two initial categories situated in relation to the other: the ‘disadvantaged’ and the relative ‘advantaged’ pupil group.

Initially, the ‘level playing field’ metaphor was conceptualised as a noun (The American Banker, 1979) so described a possible goal to strive for. It has since also become an action, with the verb ‘levelling’ describing an equalising act. This then creates a third category or identity – the ‘leveller’ or the equaliser. In education, this identity category can vary from policymakers,

school leaders, class teachers or even student-teachers. It is those individuals who bear responsibility and accountability for 'levelling' educational practices in a given context.

To explore the metaphor of 'levelling the playing field' further, particularly regarding ITTE, the next section focuses on a final narrative from one student-teacher, Selma. Selma's story sheds some light on what we may consider an unequal 'playing field' in terms of an ITTE placement experience. It continues a consideration of identity formation during a student-teacher's induction and explores "the formulation of specific forms of narrative which constitute commonalities and differences between self and others" (Mottier, 2008: 192).

10.4 Placements and Playing Fields (Selma's Story)

As demonstrated, there is some flexibility to the conceptualisation of a 'playing field' in education, though it clearly relates to forms of equality or equity, seeking to redress balances in terms of educational disadvantages. While concerned with disadvantages in broad terms, 'levelling the playing field' is not always strictly about children classed as 'disadvantaged' by DfE definitions of free school meals eligibility and looked after status (DfE, 2025a). What appears to be consistent in responses from interview participants, however, is that all conceptualise 'levelling the playing field' as a phrase related specifically to children's education.

This conceptualisation therefore considers advantages and disadvantages, equality of opportunity and outcomes, and attainment and progress, purely in terms of children's experiences. This may be expected with such implications of international and national league tables being based around children's – and therefore a school's or a nation's – data. No interview participant considered 'levelling the playing field' beyond these boundaries. But there are certainly inequalities to address in terms of ITTE, particularly for student-teachers and apparent inconsistent experiences (as explored in chapter eight) faced in terms of placements and ITTE courses.

This section explores a narrative told by student-teacher Selma. The intention is to consider disadvantages student-teachers can face in ITTE with a focus on Selma's recollection of a placement experience.

Selma describes starting at her second placement school. She initially expects one mentor "because I had one before. And then I was told that my senior mentor would be the deputy head […] So I've got two" (Selma, 2024). She also describes being late to start her placement

as she states, “my university didn’t find me that placement until, like, a week after I should have started. So, I was quite late going there” (Selma, 2024).

Selma highlights a lack of consistency between her two placements. In the first, as she understands it, she only had one mentor. In the second placement, she describes a “senior mentor” (Selma, 2024), which is a reference to her ‘lead mentor’ as proposed in the ITTMRR. Selma adds, “mostly I saw my, um, teacher in the classroom” (Selma, 2024) referring to her class-based mentor. Selma’s recollection of events shows her at a disadvantage early on in this second placement. She appears unaware of the oversight structure and lead mentor role with no understanding of this from her first placement. Therefore, she is uncertain coming into her second placement, though with an understanding that she now has a second “senior” (Selma, 2024) mentor overseeing her placement. In addition, she is late to start her second placement through no fault of her own, missing an entire week of practice and training.

Selma explains that because of her late start, she began “teaching after week one” (Selma, 2024) when the original intention was for her to start teaching after two weeks to allow for her to settle into her new role with a new class in a new school. Selma adds that the experience was “quite difficult in the sense that, you know, just like being thrown in” (Selma, 2024). This idea of “being thrown in” resonates with Sophie’s feelings of being “thrown in the deep end” (Sophie, 2023) and becoming “out of my depth” (Sophie, 2023) as a new student-teacher. Much like Sophie (see section 8.2.1), Selma appears to internalise these issues. In a situation similar to both Sophie and Zahra too (see 8.3.1), Selma describes a kind of ‘luck’ or ‘fortune’ in the face of difficulty given her previous experience of working in schools: “But I think I had some knowledge, so I could kind of get away with, like… do what I need to do” (Selma, 2024).

In her narration, Selma reveals how her late arrival impacts on her placement experience. She has significantly less time to settle into her role, to get to know her class, her mentor, observe other teachers and complete any other tasks which might support her induction into the placement. To consider her situation in terms of concepts of equality, in comparison to her peers on PGCE courses, Selma is clearly disadvantaged by a lack of equality of opportunity. In fact, she faces multiple inequalities of opportunities. The plurality of her disadvantages is apparent in being late, the knock-on effect of being “thrown in” (Selma, 2024) to teaching before she is ready, and then the isolation she displays in her lack of support. This begins to become evident in Selma’s statement that “I had some knowledge, so I could kind of get away with, like… do what I need to do” (Selma, 2024).

Selma presents her placement in terms of performance and performativity. Her words are often representative of the technical and practical, with verbs like “do” (Selma, 2024) taking precedence in her language. She also talks not just in terms of tasks she performs, but also in terms of putting on a performance or pretending, represented by the phrase, “so I could kind of get away with” (Selma, 2024) it. Hiding and disguising herself and her learning needs from her mentor is indicative of a potentially weak relationship between mentor and mentee, but it also demonstrates some elements of a co-constructed understanding that Selma is responsible for *doing* more than she is responsible for *learning*. She is prematurely deemed much more as a teacher than as a student in this respect.

For Selma, demands of performance coupled with a poor mentoring relationship lead to uncertainties and insecurities. Selma describes uncertainty around planning and around teaching the class. She adds that she “struggled” (Selma, 2024) and felt she “wasn’t so much guided” (Selma, 2024) by her mentors, suggesting that she felt like she was on her own. These feelings of isolation are sedimented further as Selma explains that she did not spend her planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time with her mentor. She describes being unaware that teachers often left the premises, for example to work their PPA time from home.

For Selma, it was in “the penultimate week before I was finished” (Selma, 2024) when she learned that she could take PPA time herself. Until then she did not realise that she “could leave and go home or do whatever I need to do” (Selma, 2024). Instead, “I was made to believe that I was supposed to go and be in those classes as well because they were computing and PE” (Selma, 2024). Selma is clearly at a disadvantage here, and it is evident that there are multiple disadvantages for her. Firstly, she is isolated to the point where her mentor does not spend PPA time with her, nor does she advise Selma makes use of the time herself. Secondly, she is expected to plan and teach without support and without this PPA time. Finally, she gets little opportunity to sit with her mentor, to receive feedback or to shadow them in order to learn how she might plan lessons herself.

When asked about receiving feedback from her mentor, Selma notes that she would have one weekly meeting where her mentor would “kind of finalise what we’re doing, how I’m getting on and so on” (Selma, 2024). Again, the focus is on the practicalities of “doing” and “getting on” rather than learning. She even adds, “but the getting on is me doing the getting on, if you know what I mean” (Selma, 2024). She clarifies that this means “me going away planning, um… to teach 60 per cent of the syllabus really” (Selma, 2024) without any real direction, guidance or feedback. It is no surprise then that Selma comments on how she “struggled” (Selma, 2024)

and “thought, maybe, the mentor should have, you know, been a little bit more of a mentor” (Selma, 2024).

Like Sophie and Zahra, Selma present a story of survival and resilience in difficult circumstances. In fact, Selma labels her own resilience in stating, “you know, I've got some resilience as well, you know. And I can be professional in that sense, yeah” (Selma, 2024). But these narratives of survival and resilience are not necessarily conducive to high-quality learning environments and experiences for student-teachers. Ultimately, Selma resigns herself to a mentality of surviving. Reminiscent of Zahra’s narrative of survival (see section 8.3.1), Selma resigns herself to “just get on with my job that I’m there to do, and, just get a couple of weeks out of the way, and, just get on with my life really” (Selma, 2024).

Selma’s story clearly shows her at a constant disadvantage throughout her placement. She is late to start, but no adaptations are considered for her first weeks. As a result, she finds it difficult “being thrown in” (Selma, 2024) to something she is unprepared for. She is treated more like a teacher than a student and so her mentor is seen as not like a mentor at all. Selma lacks a strong mentorship experience or even much of a relationship to speak of. She is clearly isolated considering that she is unaware of how PPA time can be spent. These multiple disadvantages build on top of one another creating an increasingly unfair ‘playing field’ until all Selma is left with is the resilience to get through, to get “on with” it, to get her placement “out of the way” (Selma, 2024).

10.5 Conclusion

This concludes the third and final chapter of primary data analysis. Language under interrogation in this chapter has centred around concepts of equality with the metaphorical phrase ‘levelling the playing field’ as a key focus. Like other recurrent metaphors in education today, this phrase uses the language of games to suggest that education is like a sport or competition. This ‘game’ is conceptualised as unfair, but, it is suggested, certain chosen interventions can ‘level’ or equalise the supposed inequalities for those students who are deemed to be ‘disadvantaged.’

There is widespread use of the ‘levelling the playing field’ phrase beyond education and, as indicated by interview participants’ responses, it can appear more familiar in comparison to surreptitious phrases like ‘playing the game.’ Despite its presentation as a moral and socially just idea, there is wide variability in its conceptualisation and even the possibility for performative responses and practices. The goal of closing the attainment gap can base

intentions around noted “statistics purposes, so that it doesn’t show that big gap” (Amira, 2024), therefore potentially driving practices towards some of the “coercive” (Chloe, 2023) approaches to pupil data as described in the previous chapter (see section 9.2.2).

The functional operation of the phrase ‘levelling the playing field’ establishes identities and classes individuals into three distinct categories: the ‘disadvantaged’ situated in comparison to the ‘advantaged’ and supported by one who ‘levels’ in a given context. Specifically in education, as defined in DfE policy, individuals are socioeconomically disadvantaged therefore less likely to achieve the same attainment levels as their peers. Those seemingly deemed responsible for ‘levelling’ can include policymakers, school leaders, class teachers and even student-teachers.

However, interview responses indicate flexibility in such identities in education practices. ‘Disadvantaged’ can be applied beyond socioeconomic disadvantage and looked after status as Lisa suggests. Additionally, student-teachers raise possible tensions and conflicts in interpretations of equality, equity and social justice. There is also an indication of instability in the concept of the ‘playing field’ as it can shift in relation to advantage and disadvantage, as well as societal and economic changes such as the “cost-of-living crisis” (Lisa, 2023). Such broad conceptualisations can potentially lead to broad solutions for addressing gaps and ‘levelling the playing field.’

‘Levelling the playing field’ is situated around an uncertain and shifting centre. It suggests something of a clash or conflict between a neoliberal economic rationality of inequality (Bøyum, 2014) and its ostensible support for liberal values (Whitehead, 2019). In other words, it revolves around antagonistic concepts of competitive equality (The American Banker, 1979) and competitive inequality (Davies, 2014). “Power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus” (Foucault, 1982: 791) therefore identities, attitudes and behaviours are formulated within a significant site of struggle. ‘Levelling the playing field’ involves navigating and negotiating within this struggle.

“Metaphors strengthen, reproduce or subvert relations of power” (Mottier, 2008: 187) therefore ‘levelling the playing field’ has the potential to subvert and challenge dominant systems and power relations in education and in wider society. However, metaphors may also “strengthen” and “reproduce” (Mottier, 2008: 187) power. This means that in negotiating practices for ‘levelling the playing field’ there is always a potential for values and practices becoming co-opted and subsumed by the dominant neoliberal logic of inequality. Identity formation, categorisation and the relations between identified groups become highly important here, as

those ‘levelling’ inequalities may easily define ‘disadvantaged’ groups in relation to the perceived advantages of ‘advantaged’ peers.

One such example can be seen in the post-pandemic response in which the majority of funding targeted at closing attainment gaps was to be spent on tutoring (Severs, 2024) as detailed in chapter one (see section 1.1). This orientates and defines the perceived disadvantaged groups in terms of the “middle-class norms” (Major and Briant, 2023: 28) of the relative advantaged group. Whether the ‘levelling the playing field’ metaphor “subverts” or “reproduces” (Mottier, 2008: 187) power relations is dependent on how those with the power to equalise opportunities frame and implement their negotiated concepts of ‘levelling.’ But ultimately, the metaphor always retains the element of competition. In this sense, no matter its subversive potential, it ultimately always reproduces the idea that social mobility, education, and justice is a ‘game’ as it consistently reinforces the idea through the persistent and dominant language of games, sports and competition.

Selma’s story demonstrates how disadvantages in ITTE (such as starting a placement a week late) can exacerbate issues for one student-teacher (uncertainty, isolation, performative learning culture). It is reminiscent of narratives shared by Sophie and Zahra. All three narratives demonstrate discourses of survival and overcoming difficult placement experiences on their way to becoming qualified teachers. They do so while navigating the games of a performative and coercive education system and negotiating their own situated values and practices. Through all of this, they are expected to ‘level’ a complex and shifting ‘playing field’ for the children they teach and the children they will go on to teach.

ITTE marks a period of a teachers’ induction, whereby the interplay between meaning and power, policies and practices culminate in a “constitution of identity” (Mottier, 2008: 192) where student-teachers are instilled in the “belief” (Riordan, 2022: 4) laid out in the ‘Learn that…’ statement of the CCF that “high-quality teaching has a long-term positive effect on pupils’ life chances, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds” (DfE, 2019a: 9; DfE, 2024a: 11). It is a premise that is routinely upheld and reinforced through social (i.e. mentorship, oversight, leadership), cultural (i.e. the narrative of the American dream, gameshows, sports), and historical (i.e. traditions, expectations, traces of past education systems) factors.

This is not to fatalistically suggest that student-teachers and qualified teachers cannot impact upon the life chances of learners, disadvantaged or otherwise. But these ideas are significantly situated within a site of struggle in which competitive inequality undergirds the logics and

rationalities which produce actions and interventions targeted at ‘disadvantaged’ children. It situates what might be meant by ‘quality’ teaching and “high expectations” (DfE, 2024a: 11) in a framework of relative competition whereby individuals are classed and categorised in relation to one another. It presents equality in terms of the neoliberal logic of ‘the game’ whereby education is framed as a highly individualised competition, where children are in contest against other children to ascend a social ladder higher or faster than others.

Like ‘sink or swim’ and ‘playing the game’, the phrase ‘levelling the playing field’ arguably acts as a euphemistic, palatable shorthand for social mobility. It metaphorically justifies a logic of competition in education and in wider society and so rhetorically persuades and inculcates a shared cultural attitude – that there is a game and it is a game *we all have to play*. The idea of a ‘level playing field’ may further justify the game as fair, or at least give an impression of striving for fairness. Though as this chapter has discussed, it may not be easy, nor possible, for teachers to level the playing field for all children, nor is it possible to define and overcome an everchanging and shifting ‘field’ of play.

In reality, only some can get ahead within the context of a relative or comparative conceptualisation of social mobility. Those who are ahead in life are defined so in comparison to those who are behind. Such metaphors of ‘levelling the playing field’ seem on the surface to have positive connotations for eliminating barriers and securing educational inequality. But ultimately, they are part of the “building-blocks of both narratives and discourse” (Mottier, 2008: 192). Their repeated use can legitimise and justify educational practices. These metaphors share a common language of games at their roots which make up a larger conceptual idea that stimulates, inspires, and reinforces a notion that, on multiple levels and in multiple ways, education is a game. But we cannot all be winners.

The following chapter is a discussion of chapters six through to ten and therefore encapsulates the primary and secondary data analyses throughout the thesis. I follow the discussion with a final concluding chapter.

Chapter 11: Discussion

11.1 Introduction

This chapter frames a discussion which brings together the ideas explored within the data analysis chapters (chapters six to ten). As there are several chapters exploring primary (chapters eight, nine and ten) and secondary (chapters six and seven) data with a range of methods and approaches, a short summary of these chapters is necessary. It is also helpful here to illustrate how preceding chapters developed towards this data analysis, therefore I outline a short description of each chapter below.

11.1.1 Chapter Summary

In chapter one, I outlined how a suggested policy problem has been presented in recent years. The 'problem' insists on the importance of 'quality' with an enduring premise increasingly circulating in education policy, and more recently in ITTE – that quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor for children classed as 'disadvantaged.'

Chapter two charts the trajectory of ITTE reform with this premise of 'quality' teaching as the most important in-school factor for 'disadvantaged' children featuring significantly in the opening lines of the CCF and suggesting that quality mentoring can facilitate improvements to quality teaching in this early phase of a teacher's development. In reviewing reform literature, the chapter demonstrates how 'quality' can be used rhetorically (for example with the metaphorical claims of a 'golden thread', as well as repetition of keywords such as 'quality' and 'mentor') yet highlight an ethical impasse whereby teachers are deemed to bear the largest responsibility for attainment gaps between 'disadvantaged' children and their peers.

Chapter three uncovers a language of games at the heart of quality discourses and argues for closer study of such language use. This language is largely metaphorical and likens education to a game or a competition. This chapter also introduces concepts associated with Lyotard ('language games') and Foucault ('games of truth') which employ the language of games. Key ideas like 'performativity' and 'subjectivity' as well as Lyotard and Foucault's differing articulations of meaning and power are discussed in terms of their relevance to this research study.

Chapter four outlines a methodology and research methods for interrogating the metaphorical language of games, how it has become prominent in current discourses, what it suggests about definitions of 'quality', and the kinds of identities and actions it can produce in ITTE

today. Multiple methods are justified in the chapter with a broad historical and political focus on the analysis of primary and secondary data. This chapter considers analysis in three parts: critical discourse analysis (CDA), narrative analysis (NA), and metaphor analysis (MA).

Chapter five is an exploration of ethical considerations for the research study. There are significant and enduring claims centred around social justice at the heart of this study, therefore a duty towards ethical stances and behaviours is required. This chapter details ethical approaches to recruitment and participation, communication of risks and benefits, and consideration of safe and respectful practices regarding participants' data. The chapter also outlines my researcher positionality.

Chapter six begins to explore historical and political justifications for discourses of quality today. The chapter begins by outlining the origins of the monitorial system of education and demonstrates how the dual imperatives of cost-effective teacher-training and the education of poor children became intertwined within a hierarchical, monitorial method. Following reform in the nineteenth century, a new pupil-teacher model took precedence, yet traces of the monitorial system could still be found and can still be found in elements of education systems today – including ITTE.

Chapter seven indicates that metaphors relating to industry and public health which justified reforms of the past have today been superseded by predominant metaphorical ideas of games and competition. This language of games is embedded in policy discourses, particularly evident in suggested reforms around quality teaching and quality mentoring. Within this chapter, the main focus included the language of 'chance', of taking the 'lead', and of striving to be 'world-class.' I argue that this language constitutes a larger metaphorical framework that presents education as a game and reforms to a supposed ITTE marketplace as situated within a neoliberal ideology of competition.

Chapter eight begins a three-part exploration of primary data. The chapter initially focuses on common language found in comments provided in online questionnaires. This language is often marked by binary distinctions such as 'make or break'. In exploring research interviews, a narrative is presented in which Sophie tells about a time she came close to considering leaving her ITTE course. Her story is marked by its metaphorical language in which Sophie uses metaphors related to the 'sink or swim' binary such as feeling 'out of depth' in difficult situations. The chapter closes with a focus on the language of 'luck' and explores Zahra's narrative centred around survival and resilience in the face of difficult placement experiences.

Chapter nine continues the analysis of primary data. This chapter focuses predominantly on a common, yet under-the-surface, metaphor of 'playing the game'. This phrase can manifest in several ways, including 'We have to play the Ofsted game.' The chapter demonstrates how these phrases are not always recognised or understood by student-teachers, but it is something that they can come to understand over time. In this sense it is a hidden element of a teacher's induction. Not a part of a 'core content' framework, but nonetheless something that seems inherent in the ecosystem of teaching in schools today. The metaphor also has wider use, with new measures for accreditation required for ITTE providers. Therefore, its use by university staff is considered too.

Chapter ten discusses a related phrase, 'levelling the playing field'. The phrase can be related to the premise that 'quality' teaching is the most important in-school factor for 'disadvantaged' children as it has significant associations to redressing balances and equalising inequalities. It also shares lexical roots with 'playing the game' phrases as the 'playing field' also suggests games, sports and competition. This chapter highlights the complexities of inculcating and acculturating student-teachers into professional discourses and practices, particularly the conflicts and tensions at play regarding concepts of equality and equity in a neoliberal education system.

11.1.2 What Has This Thesis Demonstrated?

Education reform is increasingly legitimised via discourses of quality. At the heart of ITTE reforms in recent years sits a premise that quality of teaching is the most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for pupils, particularly children classed as 'disadvantaged'. Suggestions for improving teaching quality include proposals for "high-quality mentoring" (DfE, 2021b: 9). Quality mentoring is also suggested as a mechanism for improving teacher retention rates (DfE, 2019c).

Quality is posed as a problem in policy, often in response to global rankings in International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSA) such as PISA. Quality concerns have existed before such preoccupations with ILSAs and international league tables and it is important to consider how these may still be framed by other historical and political conditions as demonstrated in earlier chapters. In addition, quality reforms are often coupled with a focus on promoting social justice, for example the education of 'disadvantaged' children, while concerns with international competition can often be more veiled. In this sense, concepts of 'disadvantage' can be used to legitimise reforms with an underlying purpose of international competition at their heart.

This thesis has explored how particular words, phrases and metaphors act as "building-blocks" (Mottier, 2008: 192) of narratives and discourses in ITTE. Keywords considered include 'quality', 'mentor' and 'disadvantaged' while phrases considered include 'playing the game' and 'levelling the playing field'. I argue that these words and phrases constitute a discursive ecosystem in which practitioners dwell today. Student-teachers and teacher-educators work within the frameworks of these discourses and practices. Their experiences, thoughts and ideas have been presented throughout this thesis.

Beyond the metaphorical phrases related to games ('playing the game'; 'levelling the playing field') practitioners also employ and reflect on a range of metaphorical terms in ITTE discourses and practices. These can legitimise and justify educational ideas, actions and attitudes. Metaphors considered include 'making and breaking', 'sinking and swimming', and 'jumping through hoops.' Such metaphors can conceal and reveal related discourses of performance, resilience and survival.

Closer analysis of such metaphors, narratives and discourses can reveal neoliberal values of competition and inequality at the heart of education practice and ITTE reform. These values can be rhetorically and euphemistically negotiated and dispersed in education policy as well as via professional cultures.

The next section brings together the findings of my data analysis (chapters six to ten). I have structured this discussion around my three research questions.

11.2 Discussion of Research Questions

11.2.1 Research Question 1

What are the historical and political conditions that constitute a logic of competition and inequality in education today?

The *Education Reform Act 1988* brought a series of market-oriented approaches to education. Developing from these reforms, a school-based approach to ITTE was promoted, Standards Assessment Tests (SATs) were introduced, and Ofsted began inspecting schools. Quality became a focus throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s with the introduction of PISA. SATs and Ofsted helped in developing a new environment and professional culture in which performance, ranking and comparison of schools was part of a drive towards a 'quality'

education system. With the introduction of PISA some years later, further ranking systems emerged comparing the education systems of different countries to one another.

This seemed to be a marked shift from education systems of the past, with an underlying market ideology that competition drives quality. Today, this 'quality' discourse aligns with social justice values of closing attainment gaps and supporting children classed as 'disadvantaged.' The first allocation of pupil premium funding for children classed as 'disadvantaged' came in 2011, the same year in which the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) was established. Both pupil premium funding and the EEF originated and developed within the context of austerity measures in England and have framed 'quality' discourses and policy responses in recent years. However, today we have reached an impasse whereby "there is nothing else to do but focus on quality" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021: 34).

This impasse involves a shift in focus away from societal issues which produce and reinforce socioeconomic and educational inequalities towards schools, teachers and 'quality' teaching as the proposed solution to this deeply rooted and complex issue. It is also marked by an underlying market-oriented logic of competition, which cannot effectively support all children, 'disadvantaged' or otherwise. This logic of competition instead sustains a contest between individuals where children compete with other children and schools compete with other schools.

Despite this neoliberal logic of the market being effectively brought in through the reforms of 1988, a logic of competition has existed for far longer in the "competition of individuals being classified in relation to one another" (Foucault, 1977: 162). Traces of this logic can be found centuries ago, in former education systems which sought to rank and categorise learners. Not only were these systems of competition, they were also systems of inequality. These were marked by power relations, hierarchical approaches, and other such "dividing practices" (Foucault, 1982: 777).

For example, from the end of the eighteenth century, a monitorial system of education was being developed. Its benefits at the time were deemed to include a certain level of ignorance from children classed as monitors, thereby granting "ascendency and dominion" (Bell, 1797: 25) to school leaders. Other perceived benefits included economy of time which could in turn "exercise power" (Foucault, 1977: 162) over subordinates, cost-effective approaches to teaching large numbers with little renumeration, and a diffuse power of surveillance and control.

Unequal power relations, mediated through tightly ordered hierarchies, coupled with a competitive element that ranked, compared and categorised children in terms of their social standing within the monitorial system were key elements and methods of education at the

time. Many of these concepts are still valued today, including efficiency, economy, surveillance and control. A hierarchical structure with increasingly new categories and positions is also as much an element of the monitorial system as it is for modern-day ITTE, especially now with the introduction of the 'lead mentor' role whose main function appears to be "oversight" (DfE, 2021b: 11) of mentors.

Selma's story in the previous chapter demonstrates the extent to which a mentor's role can be interpreted. In Selma's case, she describes her mentor as providing little guidance and little mentoring. She even suggests that her mentor could have "been a little bit more of a mentor" (Selma, 2024) in her narrative and it would not be a stretch to better describe some mentors and lead mentors rather as monitors or managers. The logic of the monitorial system – a system of hierarchical instruction mediated by power relations to assure "the capillary functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977: 198) – is still the logic of apprenticeship models of teacher-training today, whereby teaching is conceptualised as "a craft" which "is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master" (Gove, 2010).

The underlying logic of competition and inequality is not necessarily new to education today, but its metaphorical conceptualisation as a game is a new take on a seemingly old idea. Today, competition is not merely about pitting children against other children (although this is still inherent within the system). Since the 1990s it now involves a national competition between schools, and since the 2000s it involves an international competition between countries. The logic of competition and inequality today manifests in metaphors of 'games' and it seems there are multiple games to play – at personal, local, national and international levels.

11.2.2 Research Question 2

To what extent can rhetorical and metaphorical language constitute, reproduce and justify discourses and practices related to policy reforms, particularly in terms of quality in ITTE?

There is evidence in the writings of both Joseph Lancaster and James Kay that metaphorical language can be used as rhetorical devices which seek to justify educational practices. Lancaster employs metaphorical language to legitimise a monitorial system which effectively has children classed as 'monitors' teach the children classed as 'pupils'. Lancaster presents this setup as mutually beneficial to both children. He affirms this approach with the idea that, through repeating their learning and teaching another, a monitor might "rivet" (Lancaster, 1805: 51) knowledge into both a learner's mind as well as their own. Lancaster completes his justification by concluding: "thus, *he* cannot possibly teach the class without improving *himself* at the same time" (Lancaster, 1805: 51, original emphasis).

While metaphors of riveting knowledge into the minds of pliant learners and compliant monitors may have had a persuasive effect in the early 1800s (Lancaster's success in persuasion may be evident from his successful charitable donations), decades later these metaphors of industry were no longer as prominent and perhaps no longer as persuasive. Yet, it is again metaphor that Kay utilises to justify calls for education reform. Kay's metaphors are more extensive and sophisticated with layers of metaphorical language constructing a larger conceptual framework of education as akin to healthcare. They suggest that pauperism is a "taint" (Kay, 1839: 3) and that education is the cure – "one of the most important means of eradicating the germs of pauperism from the rising generation" (Kay, 1839: 3).

Throughout the twentieth century, metaphors are used again to help legitimise and justify reform. One significant example is that of the "five giants on the road of reconstruction" (Beveridge, 1942: 6) which paved the way for sweeping reforms to social welfare and state infrastructure in the postwar period. It also led towards the *Education Act 1944* which established many educational ideals which still exist today, including the right to free education for all children.

Not only do these metaphors justify and legitimise reform, they also coincide with economic imperatives and political rationalities of their times. Lancaster's "rivet" (Lancaster, 1805: 51) metaphor speaks of its time and place, as do Bell's which liken his teachers and monitors to his "sergeants and corporals" (Meiklejohn, 1881: 48) suggesting that dominance and servitude are positive outcomes of his system. Lancaster's metaphor aligns with the growing power of industry and machinery, while Bell's invokes a military hierarchy. This is not to say that these metaphors are alien to us today, but they constitute a particular political rationality which values "surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of a family over his household and goods" (Foucault, 1991: 92). Bell's endorsement of his "scrutinising eye" (Bell, 1797: 26) offers another example of this apparently patriarchal surveillance mentality.

Lancaster speaks as if the children he works with are objects that can be shaped and moulded through industrial practices, whereas Bell considers children as subordinates in a militaristic hierarchy. Both present children as their subjects. Foucault demonstrates how a patriarchal economic model is later superseded with "the emergence of the problem of population" (Foucault, 1991: 99). This includes national and global factors related to populations such as epidemics and mortality. This shift from one economic and political rationality to another is evident in Kay's metaphors decades later which centre around public health and societal wellbeing.

Today, we certainly live in different times. Yet our modern system contains traces of these older models, systems and logics. There is something distinct of the current moment however, and this thesis has attempted to demonstrate how our current moment aligns with a political

rationality underscored by a mentality of competition. This mentality is justified and legitimised via metaphors employing the language of games.

Some of this language is produced and reinforced in policy discourses of quality. For example, notions of having a 'world-class' education system shine through in ITTE policy. Metaphorical phrases like 'levelling the playing field' frequently justify education practices today, not only in policy but in research, and outputs from influential organisations such as the EEF. Like Kay's more sophisticated metaphorical construction, today we have a conceptual framework that relates education to a game or competition which can be found in many different places – from the exported terminology of 'coaching' to the roles of 'lead' mentors and the unequal 'playing field' that mark student-teachers' and schoolchildren's everyday experiences.

There is more to the rhetorical function of metaphors, however. While the language of games can carry through policy and authoritative channels like the EEF, there are counter-discourses, counter-narratives and counter-metaphors to consider which do not feature in policy documentation but are nonetheless influential. Such counter-metaphors can be seen in the phrase 'We have to play the Ofsted game.' This is not a metaphor that has been passed down from the DfE or the EEF for school and university staff to follow and incorporate into their identities, belief systems and professional cultures. It instead acts as something of a response towards the "scrutinising eye" (Bell, 1797: 26) of quality monitoring.

Today, it is seemingly a reaction to the prevailing policy reform agenda which seeks to control more precisely what schools and ITTE providers may do. While metaphors of 'playing the game' have something of a 'counter' element to them, they are also ineluctably tied to a compliance culture. So, while the phrase might seem surreptitious, under-the-surface or even rebellious, it has ultimately been subsumed by the enforcement, oversight and unceasing requirements of 'quality' measures and so may even justify and reproduce undesirable practices of compliance and performativity. This is apparent in the language of obligation such as 'we have to' and 'we must' which accompany these metaphorical phrases.

Other 'counter' metaphors can appear in response to 'quality' discourses as detailed by student-teachers. These will be discussed next.

11.2.3 Research Question 3

What are the effects of rhetorical and metaphorical language on discourses and practices in terms of ITTE policy reforms?

A political rationality of competition exists in education today. It can be found in metaphors which present education as a series of games. Specifically, metaphors like 'playing the game'

suggest that quality monitoring, for example Ofsted inspections, can be overcome by 'playing' correctly. This involves making the right moves, strategising in the right ways, developing the right tactics. But we cannot all win the game, and some metaphors express a response to this relative and comparative logic inherent within 'quality' discourses.

For example, in an early Ofsted annual report, the inspectorate notes how some media coverage only focuses on the extreme ends of inspection report outcomes. The example is given of a media focus on either schools receiving "'top marks' or 'a caning'" (Ofsted, 1994: 12). There is a metaphorical element to these interpretations of grades, particularly the worst as a 'caning' which invokes violent disciplinary practices of corporal punishment. But there is also a binary distinction here, which cannot be blamed on media sensationalism alone. These binary metaphorical discourses may be seen rather as the effects of a relative, comparative logic of competition which underlies market reforms and Ofsted's role as the arbiters of school quality.

These effects of discourses of quality can be found again, in similar binary and metaphorical fashion, in the 'make or break' and 'sink or swim' language used by student-teachers when describing experiences with mentors on school-based placements. This language effectively reveals the underside of 'quality' discourses. For all those who 'make' it, there are those who 'break' under the pressure of ITTE practices. For all those who 'swim' successfully, there are those who undoubtedly 'sink.'

These metaphorical articulations become a hidden element of a student-teacher's induction. They come to understand the expectations and narratives of resilience and survival. These metaphors are seemingly dispersed and used by others in a common language which expresses the realities of ITTE. In this sense, these are rationalities and mentalities which can take shape "in the head, the heart and soul" (Ball, 2016: 1047). They are metaphors that can form identities.

These metaphors carry underlying messages about how student-teachers might act and what they might expect. They constitute a formation of the self as student-teachers negotiate these meanings and these 'truths' for themselves as they develop throughout their ITTE courses. This is not done as an active reflection but continuously ongoing in the background of professional development and identity construction. Metaphors can become easily "worn-out" and "powerless to affect the senses" (Nietzsche, 1873: 180). They become part of the air that we breathe or the water we swim in. They can easily be accepted and remain unnoticed,

unchallenged and unquestioned. In other words, metaphors can serve to normalise and legitimise everyday practices in subtle yet powerful ways.

The practices they might normalise are plentiful and dependent on the metaphors used, the meanings they carry, and the interpretation of the audience. Some metaphors under discussion throughout the primary data analysis include metaphors of performance or performativity such as 'jumping through hoops.' This can legitimise practitioners doing seemingly unnecessary or even counter-intuitive tasks. The metaphor of 'playing the game' can justify a range of practices, including deceiving an Ofsted inspector during an inspection, or changing a child's test score to make attainment look better than it may really be.

This metaphor of 'playing the game' was not recognised by all student-teachers, but it appears to be something that may be learned or acquired over time. It is a tacit knowledge which appears as something akin to a hidden element of a hidden curriculum in ITTE. Student-teachers might tacitly acquire this knowledge of the metaphor, its meaning and its power as a hidden element of induction into the profession.

This marks the end of the discussion of research questions. In the following section, I offer some reflections on the research study in terms of its aims, findings, design and implications.

11.3 Reflections

This section outlines a reflection on the research study and consists of three parts: *Aims and Findings; Research Methodology and Design;* and *Implications for Further Research*. The final chapter follows afterwards concluding the thesis.

11.3.1 Aims and Findings

My intention throughout this research study has been to explore language use in ITTE policies and practices. I sought to question, consider and destabilise enduring discourses centred around 'quality' and 'mentoring', the language and attitudes towards 'disadvantaged' children that can serve to legitimise reform, and the rhetorical techniques and metaphorical influences that can produce and reproduce discourses, knowledges, beliefs and practices in ITTE today.

Rhetoric can operate via the repetition of single words throughout policy texts, for example as shown by the high frequency of words 'quality' (161 counts) and 'mentor' (143 counts) in the ITTMRR. Claims of a 'golden thread' in policy may be seen as a rhetorical technique in the

sense that the phrase is both repeated as well as metaphorical. As well as repeated words and phrases, entire sentences can be frequently repeated in policy, research and discourse. One such dominant reiterated idea is that:

> The quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for pupils – and it is particularly important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (DfE, 2019a: 3).

It is circulated within policies, prescribed as a belief for student-teachers to 'learn' via the CCF, and offered to legitimise reforms to ITTE including calls for improving quality of mentoring for student-teachers and early career teachers (ECTs). This idea of quality is historically and politically situated and pervades education discourses including market reforms to ITTE today. At the word, phrase and sentence level, these rhetorical constructs can serve to form and reform professional identities, cultures and practices.

Along with intentional rhetorical techniques such as repetition and metaphor (and repetition *of* metaphor evident in the 'golden thread' example), this research study has also revealed metaphors that may be used by individuals in more unintentional or incidental ways. These metaphors may not have been purposefully crafted like those written into policy or political speeches but are rather recycled and reused within everyday conversations between practitioners. This is to say that when practitioners use or repeat metaphorical language, they may not necessarily be intending to persuade an audience but rather using what appears to be a common, understandable, shared language.

These findings may therefore help to articulate a theoretical perspective on relationships between language, knowledge and power. While persuasive influence undoubtedly comes from DfE policy, along with coercive measures to reform ITTE through threats of institutional de-accreditation, there clearly exists a professional network of influence between teacher-educators, student-teachers, mentors, lead mentors, managers and so on. There is a power in the common language shared within the professional culture, yet it is a power which may potentially remain unknown to many who might use such language.

This research study has been an attempt to understand how power plays out in policies, practices and discourses. It has focused not only on the tactics and strategies of power, but of accidents, chances and happenstance – and even jeopardy, risks and hazards. These findings may reveal a power that is often hidden beneath the surface of our everyday conversations and practices as education professionals.

11.3.2 Research Methodology and Design

The research study involved a range of methods regarding data collection and data analysis. This involved online questionnaires with student-teachers and semi-structured interviews with student-teachers and teacher-educators. Interviews allowed for recent views, perspectives and narratives to surface, but interview analysis was also supported and complemented by historical and political analysis. Secondary data analysis in the form of a "history of the present" (Foucault, 1977: 31) and critical discourse analysis were required when undertaking interviews as they reveal the instability and contingency (Fadyl and Nichols, 2013) as well as institutional patterns of knowledge (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2017) that form our present assumptions within professional cultures.

Secondary data took the form of influential texts centred around the themes of education reform, in particular those regarding teacher training, quality of teaching, hierarchical pedagogical systems of monitoring and mentoring, and the education of children from lower socioeconomic classes. An approach was taken to data analysis which drew on metaphor analysis (MA), particularly with reference to Mottier (2008), who grounds MA within the disciplines of both narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis. Such an approach to analysis allows for an articulation of power that is rooted both in the everyday personal narratives of participants as well as in the larger historical, political and cultural ideas in which participants are situated.

Online questionnaires with student-teachers contributed to the study in several ways. Firstly, the questionnaires offered a way for student-teachers to engage with the research study with little demand on their time. Likert scale questions gave initial direction to the study as well as a general understanding of how student-teachers perceived their placement and mentoring experiences during a particular time in their ITTE courses. Furthermore, online questionnaires enabled optional comments to be given by student-teachers, which unearthed some of the shared language used by student-teachers (i.e. 'make or break' as demonstrated in section 8.2). Online questionnaires also allowed for equality monitoring by capturing and clarifying personal information, including data regarding protected characteristics. This data can reveal patterns or trends regarding different demographic groups and potentially contribute to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work.

For example, equality monitoring reveals that the three narratives presented by student-teachers throughout chapters eight to ten – Sophie's, Zahra's and Selma's stories – all come from non-white, female student-teachers. As demonstrated previously (see section 5.3.3),

there is an urgent need for research to address the under-representation of non-white individuals at every career stage beyond ITTE in the teaching profession. While my data can describe some examples of personal experiences regarding placements and mentoring, one limitation is that this does not go far enough in articulating how identity, the lived experiences of individuals, and social or institutional norms or cultures may contribute to such under-representation throughout and beyond the ITTE phase. There is therefore a need to consider the use of research methods that may develop closer relationships, facilitate more open conversations, and critically address structural barriers in the education profession which may discriminate in terms of race, gender and other protected characteristics, as well as the intersections between these.

Another limitation of the study came from an original intention to work with multiple universities. Out of three primary ITTE providers approached, only one agreed to take part. My data collection took place during a time in which policy reforms were making changes to practices and ITTE institutions were responding to reaccreditation processes. Additionally, it took place at a time in which schoolteachers were taking strike action for improved pay and conditions, and more broadly many were feeling the effects of what has been termed a cost-of-living crisis (Calafati et al., 2023). It was not necessarily an ideal time for practitioners to offer to give their free time to a doctoral research project. In hindsight, working with three universities may have been beyond the scope of what this study could achieve, and today I am both grateful to the university which allowed me research access and contented with the data collected from participants which have informed much of this study. However, questions remain regarding how researchers might secure access to education practitioners during crucial times of reform and crises, as well as questions about what researchers may miss when access is restricted or denied.

In terms of my approach to semi-structured interviews, my intention was to use the physical presence of traditional games and board games as an attempt to reify the abstract metaphors related to games under investigation. This was not always possible as some interviews took place online, often due to convenience and consideration of participants. It is difficult to know fully the impact that inclusion of games had on participants for those who were interviewed in-person, yet it appeared to prompt initial discussion in some cases. For example, Chloe's account of one of her reasons for leaving teaching (see section 9.2.2) was stimulated by the presence of games on tables and she was able to speak in terms of 'playing the game' as soon as our interview began.

On the other hand, in a group interview with student-teachers, metaphors of 'playing the Ofsted game' were not easily recognised. My attempt to bring out the recurring language of games in education discourses did not work as intended in this case as it was not familiar to those student-teachers present. As a result, this approach did little to mitigate against a participant "saying what she thinks she ought to say" (Scheurich, 1997: 67) as was partly intended with this research design (see section 4.3.1). One issue here was in my early belief that as both a student and ITTE staff member I would be uniquely placed as both an insider and outsider (Floyd and Arthur, 2012) who might relate to both student-teachers and teacher-educators. On reflection, my simplistic understanding overlooked my status as a qualified teacher and doctoral student. Such power dynamics became apparent during interviews with student-teachers, as in the example of student-teachers being unfamiliar with games metaphors in relation to education.

The imbalance in terms of the power dynamics between myself and student-teachers was also evident in some of the participant responses. This may have been due to my research focus on ITTE policy reforms, including key documents like the *ITT Core Content Framework* – a document that would be very familiar to teacher-educators but far less so (if at all) to student-teachers. Essentially, the design of interviews was often skewed more towards the kinds of knowledges (tacit and otherwise) familiar to teacher-educators rather than student-teachers, leading to some noticeable reticence in answers. While this reticence allowed me to understand somewhat how game metaphors may come to be understood over time as part of an acculturation into the professional culture of teaching, it is important to highlight how in such cases the inclusion of games could even be confusing, alienating or exclusionary to participants who may feel like they do not belong. Any future research of this kind should be mindful to be inclusive of participants, particularly new or novice practitioners. Recognising and realising power dynamics more fully is one important step towards this.

A final notable limitation is that the use of board games and traditional games may also presuppose what a 'game' is, thus potentially directing participants to only speak about games in certain ways. Games exist in many forms, including parlour games or video games which do not have boards or pieces but different and unique guidelines or equipment depending on their conventions. In this way, my method can potentially limit the possibility for myriad meanings and ideas about games to manifest. This may potentially be addressed with the inclusion of an additional question, such as 'If education is a game, what kind of game is it most like?' The value or use of such a question would of course depend on the researcher's aims.

While I recognise strengths with my research methodology and design including how secondary analysis complements the primary analysis, this section has also outlined important limitations to consider when designing future research. As a researcher, I have learned that greater emphasis should be placed on understanding identities, positions and power dynamics - particularly in research interviews. This involves considering the kinds of prior knowledge and experience that participants bring to interviews as well as how my own position and identity may situate me in relation to participants.

To some extent, I have considered the different identities within the participant groups (i.e. student-teachers and teacher-educators), as well as considered my own identity, formation of my subjectivity and researcher positionality (see section 5.6). However, future research should consider the dynamics between these identities and groups in greater depth and examine further the relational power dynamics that exist between research participants and researchers. Future research may benefit from establishing closer relationships to participants, to possibly co-construct research in collaborative ways, and potentially in speaking with participants at intervals over time rather than in one-off interviews. Such changes may support a greater understanding of EDI in ITTE and beyond, as well as support research design in terms of establishing lines of enquiry and questioning and begin to address power dynamics between 'researcher' and 'participant' in new and alternative ways.

Lastly, it is important to be mindful that research can too be seen as a 'game' whereby implicit rules and procedures can be understood between researchers and participants. Research interviews and online questionnaires involving participants may therefore carry risks of performative responses. Future research must also be attentive to this, and researchers should remain open to alternative approaches, theories and methods in the design of education research.

11.3.3 Implications for Further Research

Here I consider implications for further research in three areas: in ITTE, in education more broadly, and beyond education.

Further change is needed in ITTE in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). For example, as outlined in chapter five (see section 5.3.3), considerations of teacher recruitment and retention through a lens of race and ethnicity reveal deep issues in terms of underrepresentation of non-white ethnic groups beyond the ITTE stages (Worth et al., 2022). While I did not specifically intend to only present narratives from non-white, female student-

teachers, the three core narratives presented from Sophie, Zahra and Selma came from non-white, female participants. While these narratives reveal some of the issues student-teachers can face during their ITTE placements and courses, limited attention was given to factors such as ethnicity or gender in terms of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, therefore there will be opportunities for further research to address such factors more consciously and specifically to consider further what social, cultural and political issues allow for such disparities in terms of teacher workforce representation and how these might be overcome.

My research study has predominantly focused on reforms to ITTE in recent years. The frequently repeated idea that quality of teaching is the most important in-school factor for improving outcomes for 'disadvantaged' children is not limited to ITTE, however. As shown in chapter one, it is common in a range of research outputs as well as DfE policy (see section 1.2) with implications far beyond ITTE. This research study raises important questions about concepts of quality today and how it can play out in practices. Such ideas about quality of teaching go beyond the education of student-teachers and the concepts they are required to learn. Further research might consider the effects these discourses may have on education practices at multiple levels, for example including ways in which primary school leaders spend pupil premium funding with concepts of 'quality' and 'quality of teaching' as major justifications and legitimisations for financial decision making.

Beyond education, questions remain about how attainment gaps can be closed by moving past the limited focus of in-school factors and making connections across policy areas and across social and institutional barriers. This research study has also employed a method and analysis which questions the power of metaphor as solely an intentional rhetorical device, therefore consideration of how metaphors circulate and disperse within different professional communities and cultures may allow for further questioning of the power of rhetoric, including that which might appear hidden or unconscious. Finally, critical research is urgently needed on the effectiveness of 'quality education' discourses regarding the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly SDG4, which has hugely significant existential implications yet risks being subsumed by a neoliberal concept of quality underscored by values of inequality and competition.

Chapter 12: Conclusion

For all the claims of 'golden threads' in teacher education reform and drives towards better 'quality' of education for 'disadvantaged' children, there is little to speak of that appears worth celebrating in England's reforms to ITTE in recent years. High-quality mentoring is suggested as a way to improve teacher retention rates. It is also deemed to support quality teaching, which in turn should support the education of 'disadvantaged' children. ITTE reforms have so far had "little impact" (McLean and Worth, 2025: 18) on teacher retention, while the primary school attainment gap remains high today at a gap of ten months between 'disadvantaged' pupils and their peers (Education Policy Institute, 2025).

There are no metrics which can adequately stand as evaluations of ITTE reforms or the education system as a whole today. It is neither my intention to evaluate policy claims in terms of cause and effect, nor inputs and outputs. My intention has instead been to consider the logics, rationalities and mentalities that underpin ITTE and the wider education system today. Attainment gaps matter, as do retention gaps, though the problems they represent are so highly complex and deeply rooted that there are dangers in oversimplifying them.

Research into teacher education requires exploration of cultural ideas, values and beliefs along with the ways in which these are formulated and reinforced, for example through rhetorical language. Such research requires "taking account of the ways that metaphors, narratives, and literary devices" (Cochran-Smith, 2005: 3) may justify and legitimise assumptions, beliefs and cultural attitudes in ITTE. Metaphors can shape identities and, specifically, metaphors of games in education can promote neoliberal values of competitive inequality. Therefore, this research study has important implications for researchers, policymakers, leaders, practitioners and children.

Education researchers may consider the power of rhetoric on identity formation and professional acculturation and also challenge dominant ideas around 'quality' in education alongside wider discourses and narratives, which metaphors often constitute as "building-blocks" (Mottier, 2008: 192). Policymakers may learn that while some metaphors might appear to be promoted seemingly within their control, such as ideas of a 'golden thread' in ITTE, other counter-metaphors are commonly communicated within professional cultures, such as 'the Ofsted game.' Concepts of 'playing the game' may even be reinforced by the related language used in ITTE policy, for example, the language of being world-class, of being in the lead, and the language of chance (see chapter seven). Politicians and policymakers should also consider the 'game' they invest in to maintain or advance their country's position in PISA

rankings, and contemplate the effects such a conceptualisation can have on education systems, personnel and the children they should aim to best serve.

This research study may also illuminate to senior leaders, teacher-educators, mentors and practitioners the cultural ideas and beliefs we project, especially those we may not realise we present, or those which may be dissonant with our personal values. Such understanding may be psychologically demanding to practitioners. For example, it may not be obvious to a teacher-educator that their shorthand remark that student-teachers need to 'jump through hoops' during their ITTE course carries unhelpful connotations of performativity. It may not be obvious to senior leaders and lead mentors that establishing mentors as figures who 'make or break' a student-teacher in 'sink or swim' learning environments reinforces ITTE discourses of survival. Nor may it be obvious to new teachers that they enter into a professional culture in which deceitful tactics like changing a student's grade may become normalised in the name of 'playing the Ofsted game'. As the effects of these kinds of metaphorical persuasions and justifications may not be immediately noticeable and often carry damaging effects, it is important to consider dissemination of this research to practitioners carefully and sensitively.

This is therefore research that critically challenges the habits and actions that we engage in, as well as dominant ideas in which practitioners' professional identities, beliefs and attitudes become enmeshed within. A 'quality' discourse appears to be near-ubiquitous today, in a "commonly held belief" (Riordan, 2022: 4) shared by teachers and increasingly reinforced throughout ITTE reform literature. Such a discourse has emerged from policy imperatives that seek to improve the country's position on international league tables. This is fused with a social justice imperative that claims to support children classed as 'disadvantaged' in achieving as well as their peers. Both priorities can relate to identified metaphors which employ the language of games: 'playing the game' and 'levelling the playing field.'

It is in juxtaposing this shared language of games that we can begin to understand 'the game' as not a singular event or concept, but ongoing and evolving at multiple levels. Gameplayers can include policymakers and politicians who may 'play' a geopolitical game centred around data from ILSAs such as PISA. This 'game' and how it is 'played' by its 'players' can powerfully determine large-scale reforms which impact upon the formation of education policy. But games are seemingly played on other levels of the education system, such as in universities where senior leaders and teacher-educators attempt to survive reaccreditation, or in schools where leaders, teachers and staff attempt to 'play the game' to meet the requirements of school inspection.

Student-teachers seemingly enter into these ‘games’ without necessarily the full awareness of what the game is, what it symbolises, what it disguises and what metaphors of games can do to professional identities. At every level, there are important questions we may ask regarding the power and agency of individuals within a wider education system. This is to say that although individuals may be deemed as ‘players’ within a particular ‘game’ within a particular part of the education system, power is not shared equally. Therefore, the ‘game’ is different for different ‘players,’ in reality taking place within complex networks and relations of power. For children, and particularly ‘disadvantaged’ children for whom practitioners may attempt to ‘level the playing field,’ we may even question to what extent they are ‘players’ at all or simply pieces in someone else’s ‘game’ – subjects in the international competition that ILSA rankings can generate and perpetuate.

These metaphors of games appear entrenched in discourses and practices, as tied to education today as the word ‘quality’ itself, which is repeated again and again, reaching a zenith in the ITTMRR with 161 counts of the word used. This is a word which sits at the heart of ITTE reforms today. Its conceptualisation within a relative or comparative logic of competition makes it significantly problematic. ‘Quality’ is “a difficult concept to argue with” (Brooks, 2023: 1), but its neoliberal formulation undergirded by values of competition and inequality reveal it as incongruent with ambitions for a fair, equal or equitable education system for all.

ITTE reforms therefore do not adequately serve all ‘disadvantaged’ children, they instead legitimise and reinforce competition amongst children, therefore the justifications for reform are problematically framed by such values of competitive inequality. By definition, it requires winners and losers and unlimited fissures and strata in-between those positions. We are more than five years on now from the initial CCF (DfE, 2019a) publication, yet the same claims remain in ITTE policy today that:

> the quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for pupils – and it is particularly important for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (DfE, 2024b: 3)

These words, phrases and metaphors can seem so deeply embedded and entrenched as to seem inescapable. But metaphors that justify education practices have come and gone, some linger but some disappear. It will take seismic changes to uproot these ideas, beliefs and “worn-out metaphors” (Nietzsche, 1873: 180) from education discourses. But it is nonetheless important and necessary work to do.

I do not know how perceptions, mindsets and rationalities might be changed towards something better – but I think a starting point lies in exposing the metaphors we read, hear, use, and disperse, bringing them into the light “to make visible what precisely is visible, which is to say to make appear what is so close, so immediate, so intimately connected with ourselves that we cannot perceive it” (Foucault, 2018: 12).

It is only in making our common metaphors known and visible that we may recognise their power and the influence they may have on ourselves and our professional cultures. Metaphors can be captivating, so we must understand how they captivate. They can be compelling, so we must question what they compel. They can be enthralling, so we must recognise when we become in thrall to them.

The power of metaphors exists in the relations we have between one another within communities and cultures, therefore we have a responsibility to use them carefully and wisely or not at all. We have a responsibility to question our colleagues, peers and leaders too, for example responding to a suggestion that ‘We have to play the game’ by provoking discussion about the metaphor itself – ‘What are the rules of this game?’ ‘Whose game are we playing?’ and ‘At what cost do we play?’

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Appendices

Appendix A: Online Questionnaire Responses

Online questionnaires were shared with student-teachers via student Moodle pages. I also invited student-teachers to participate after lectures I had taught. A quick response (QR) code was shared at the end of sessions and student-teachers could choose whether to participate or not. Inclusion criteria meant that only PGCE and BA3 (third year BA Education undergraduate) student-teachers could participate. This was based on the likelihood of participants having relevant experiences in terms of mentoring and school-based placements. In total there were 34 responses from PGCE student-teachers and 25 responses from BA3 student-teachers.

Likert scale statements were provided for student-teachers to indicate their perceptions of mentor and placement quality. Statements were based around non-statutory national standards for mentors (DfE, 2016d) published following recommendations in the *Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training* (2015). For example, statements included 'My mentor and I have a good relationship' and 'My mentor makes time for me' for which questionnaire participants could indicate levels of agreement on a scale ranging from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'. Responses from the 59 completed questionnaires are provided in Table A1. As mentioned in chapter four (see section 4.3.1) and five (see section 5.3.3), I also included data monitoring questions in online questionnaires. Due to the sensitivity of this data, it has not been presented here.

Space was given at the end of the questionnaire for student-teachers to provide optional comments. Selected comments are discussed in chapter eight (see sections 8.2 and 8.3). All comments are presented in Table A2, crediting the relevant (anonymised) participants. QP in this case stands for questionnaire participant and the number corresponds to the order questionnaires were completed in.

Table A1. Likert scale statement responses from online questionnaires distributed to student-teachers.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My mentor and I have a good relationship.	30	18	8	1	2
My mentor makes time for me.	22	25	6	4	2
My mentor gives me constructive feedback.	32	19	1	5	2
My mentor and I meet regularly to talk about my progress.	26	20	6	4	3
My mentor helps me to manage my time effectively.	19	25	11	2	2
My mentor encourages me to reflect on my teaching.	27	22	6	2	2
My mentor provides me opportunities to observe good practice.	27	24	4	2	2
My mentor helps me to access and utilise educational research to inform my teaching.	20	17	13	7	2
My mentor is honest.	31	21	4	1	2
My mentor is respectful.	32	22	2	1	2
My mentor supports me in promoting equality and diversity.	26	19	10	2	2
My mentor lets me try out new ideas.	25	23	6	3	2
My mentor tries out new ideas.	17	22	16	3	1

Likert scale responses indicate generally positive attitudes from student-teachers towards being mentored on school-based placements. Statements like 'My mentor gives me constructive feedback' and 'My mentor is respectful' have high levels of agreement from participants. Yet the data also demonstrates that seven student-teachers disagree or strongly disagree with the statement 'My mentor gives me constructive feedback' and three disagree or strongly disagree with the statement 'My mentor is respectful'. It is also notable that there is low agreement with the statement 'My mentor helps me to access and utilise educational research to inform my teaching'.

Such data articulates a glimpse into student-teacher perceptions and attitudes in a specific time and place. While this data can indicate trends in ITTE and a generally positive perception (with notable exceptions) of mentoring from the perspective of student-teachers, it was ultimately not within the scope of this thesis to use this data within my data analysis chapters. This data did offer a foundation for further exploration, however. For example, Haddock-Millar (2017) suggests that mentoring research literature can often be skewed towards "successful" and "positive" (Haddock-Millar, 2017: 164) mentoring relationships, emphasising that there is a need "to explore both positive and negative outcomes to fully understand and appreciate mentoring relationship implications from a variety of perspectives" (Haddock-Millar, 2017: 164).

Having this data on perceptions and attitudes towards mentoring relationships helped to explore "both positive and negative" (Haddock-Millar, 2017: 164) relationships. For example, Sophie's Likert scale responses were all 'Strongly agree' or 'agree' while Selma's were mostly 'Strongly disagree' with some 'Neither agree or disagree' answers. Access to this data allowed me to explore both positive and negative mentoring relationships but also allowed for the possibility of problematising student-teachers' perceptions of mentoring quality. As Sophie's narrative in chapter eight suggests, it would be incorrect to propose that Sophie's mentoring and placement experiences were simply 'positive' without any 'negative' elements.

Likert scale questions were also useful in prompting and stimulating student-teachers to provide comments. Selected comments are referred to in chapter eight which articulate some individual, contextual and nuanced responses from student-teachers who chose not to be interviewed. Comments from all student-teachers who chose to provide them are given in full in Table A2 below.

Table A2. Comments from online questionnaires distributed to student-teachers.

ID	Comments
QP3	The course has too much paper work. The journals are too much. There is not must support from UTS, personal tutors.
QP6	I had a brilliant experience with my school mentor in my first year as I am on the part- time route. This year however- I am not getting the same enthusiasm- possibly due to staff morale.
QP7	The progress journal is good but slightly confusing as a student. MOST IMPORTANTLY referring to our subject specific journal is not helpful and I don't think it relates at all.
QP13	I wasn't sure if you were asking about our lead mentor or mentor, both of mine are fantastic so this applies to both
QP36	mentor - in regards to my teacher mentor at the school not my UT
QP39	the mentors can make or break not only your placement but your whole experience on your PGCE. I have been lucky but some students have had a very rough time. There is not consistent expectations given to teachers about our role in the classroom and what we need the class teacher to do. My teacher was only informed the day before she was having a student. She doesn't have time to read the handbook. No training or information was given to her - not even a meeting at school with the lead mentor before we arrive to discuss how they are to best support us. It's too inconsistent across schools as to what support we are given and some students are put off entirely, some even drop out of the course based on how they are treated by the class teacher on their first placement. We need to be assigned a UT earlier - it should then be the UT's role to discuss with either the lead mentor or all class teachers, the students they have arriving and as a university what they need the class teachers to be doing and equally what the class teachers can expect from their BCU students. If the school have any queries during the placement they are able to email the UT or call them directly. Too much of a PGCE is down to the discretion of a class teacher which isn't being monitored closely enough by The University. Yes we must learn in practice but the current system is allowing ITT's to be put off teaching entirely - too many tears caused by poor mentors!
QP40	I find making resources as a trainee, to be the hardest part of my course as it takes up a lot of time. I believe that there should be an improvement in this area

	in education. I also believe that a good wellbeing system in a school, is what motivates us at work.
QP41	Remove the section of the survey where YOU segregate people based on gender, fictitious genders, sexual preference, fictitious sexual preferences, fictitious deity groups and ethnicity. You are a segregationalist at heart.
QP43	My First placement - My answers would have been strongly agree for all, she was amazing!. My current placement is polar opposite.
QP46	All in all so far, being on my 2nd placement (1 week before finishing) I have personally had a good experience. Quite smooth and friendly and accommodating all round, both university and school. Lectures could have been far more compressed and saved students (even f/t students) a lot of time which could be used in other ways. I hope my 3rd placement is just as smooth as my 2nd one. i'll be happy and pass with ease. Having heard horror stories from other course mates I am grateful for my experiences. I dislike how schools are able to terminate placements just out of the blue, it can be unfair on the student teacher in some cases. But overall. Very happy.
QP48	My last placement was awful and I wasn't supported so I have to repeat a placement because of it. This questionnaire doesn't reflect the impacts of mentoring in initial teacher training as it doesn't account for all the placements so far/all together. I'm just lucky that I have a great mentor and I'm at a good school now.
QP50	my current mentor is extremely helpful. My last mentor was not as organised and did not give me any time. Mentor makes a huge difference to your teaching experience.
QP59	Although I had a vary good experience on my most recent placement, I had a lot of catching up to do as I started behind after a poor second year placement. At this school they had many students and not enough time to support them. I had a total of 2 observations when I should have had 5 and was placed with a long term substitute teacher who didn't write any form of lesson plans, instead she just wrote an objective for each lesson. I got thrown into teaching phonics for the first time before I even knew what I was doing. I raised concerns multiple times and was just told that I needed to be asking more questions to learn, however I believe that the mentor should lead this, as a student you do not always know what to ask so that you can learn. I did not feel well supported on this placement and did not receive constructive feedback which left me starting behind on my final third year placement. Although I made lots of progress on my final placement and I passed,

I do not now feel prepared to have my own class in September as I started so far behind so did not teach with as much independence as some of my peers did on their final placement.

Appendix B: Contexts, Questions and Prompts for Research Interviews

As explained in chapter four, interviews were conducted in different ways and for different participants (see section 4.3.1). The context of each interview is given here (Table B1) for transparency and clarity. Note that student-teachers (ST) are distinguished from teacher-educators (TE) in the column labelled 'Group / individual'.

Table B1. Table indicating contexts for interviews conducted for the research study.

Interview no.	Participants	Group / individual	In-person / online
1.	Sophie	Individual – ST	In-person
2.	Chloe, Lisa, Sara, Ethan	Group – TE	In-person
3.	Brooke	Individual – TE	Online
4.	James	Individual – TE	Online
5.	Amira, Grace, Ella	Group – ST	In-person
6.	Ethan, Brooke (2nd interview)	Group – TE	In-person
7.	Janine	Individual – ST	Online
8.	Sophie (2nd interview)	Individual – ST	In-person
9.	Lina	Individual – ST	In-person
10.	Selma	Individual – ST	Online
11.	Karim	Individual – ST	Online
12.	Zahra	Individual – ST	Online

In-person research interviews were supported with printed questions. Questions included:

- What do we mean by quality teaching?
    - What does quality teaching mean to you?
    - Can you tell me about a time you have seen this or give any examples of this in practice?
- What do we mean by quality mentoring?
    - What does quality mentoring mean to you?
    - Can you tell me about a time you have seen this or give any examples of this in practice?
- Have you noticed the words 'quality' and 'mentor' being used more frequently in your own practice? How so?
    - Do you have any thoughts as to why word frequency (in policy and/or practice) for 'quality' and 'mentor' might be so high?

- To what extent does technology play a role in facilitating relationships with mentors and schools, and what kind of technologies or platforms are typically used?
- Have you heard the phrase ‘playing the game’ / ‘playing the Ofsted game’ before?
    - Have you noticed the language of games more broadly in your own practice?
    - Can you give any examples of times you have heard of used this kind of language?
    - What effects does this language have on us and the wider education system?
- In your opinion, what have been some of the impacts so far of ITE reforms in:
    - Improving mentoring quality?
    - Improving teaching quality?
    - Closing gaps (e.g. the attainment gap)?
    - Teacher retention?
    - Any other intended impacts of quality education (e.g. global sustainability)?
- In terms of mentoring and/or teacher training and education today, what do you think are the current ‘snakes’ and ‘ladders’?

Questions were not necessarily asked in order but used as prompts to stimulate discussion. A prompt sheet was also available as a stimulus. An example is given on the following page.

Why Games?

The Latin name for primary school, '**Ludus**' can also mean '**game**' and '**play**' as well as '**training**'.

Some well-known board games were intended to be **educational** as well as entertaining in that they were designed to teach certain lessons. *Snakes and Ladders* was originally a game that taught players about vices and virtues, while *Monopoly* was an attempt to teach players about the dangers of economic inequality.

As primary ITE practitioners and educators, we likely know the value that games can have in educating young children, but often the **language of games** can become part of our everyday thoughts, interactions and practices too.

For example, consider the following phrases and ideas and how they can relate to education today:

Playing the game
Levelling the playing field
Moving the goalposts
Changing the game
Gaming the system

…And so on.

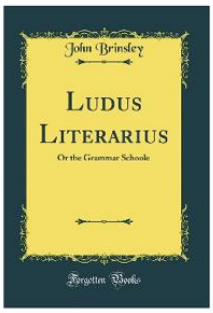
We 'play with the hand we're dealt', our performance measured in national 'league tables'. We may find ourselves 'back to square one' if things go wrong, and we might even 'lose our marbles' along the way. But we keep going with our 'skin in the game'.

Even our questions and concerns about technology in education today stem from a pivotal moment in history when a machine played a winning game of *Chess* against a grandmaster, thus realising a key milestone in the development of 'artificial intelligence' (AI).

Lastly, games are supposed to be fun! And as much as I hope that you get a lot out of this session, I hope that you're able to let off some steam and have some fun in the process too.

Thanks so much for taking part :)

A textbook commonly used to teach English to children circa 1612 entitled 'Ludus Literarius' or *the Grammar School.*



Moksha Patam an early form of *Snakes and Ladders* from India circa 1800.

Appendix C: Ethical Approval Letter

Faculty of Health, Education & Life Sciences Research Office
Seacole Building, 8 Westbourne Road
Birmingham
B15 3TN

HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk

03/Jan/2023

Mr Shaun Allen-Dooley

Shaun.Allen-Dooley@mail.bcu.ac.uk

Dear Shaun ,

Re: Allen-Dooley /#11084 /sub1 /R(A) /2022 /Dec /HELS FAEC - Exploring the effects of policy on quality mentoring practice in initial teacher education (ITE)

Thank you for your application and documentation regarding the above activity. I am pleased to take Chair's Action and approve this activity.

Provided that you are granted Permission of Access by relevant parties (meeting requirements as laid out by them), you may begin your activity.

I can also confirm that any person participating in the project is covered under the University's insurance arrangements.

Please note that ethics approval only covers your activity as it has been detailed in your ethics application. If you wish to make any changes to the activity, then you must submit an Amendment application for approval of the proposed changes.

Examples of changes include (but are not limited to) adding a new study site, a new method of participant recruitment, adding a new method of data collection and/or change of Project Lead.

Please also note that the Health, Education and Life Sciences Faculty Academic Ethics Committee should be notified of any serious adverse effects arising as a result of this activity.

If for any reason the Committee feels that the activity is no longer ethically sound, it reserves the right to withdraw its approval. In the unlikely event of issues arising which would lead to this, you will be consulted.

Keep a copy of this letter along with the corresponding application for your records as evidence of approval.

If you have any queries, please contact HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk

If you would like to provide feedback on the ethics process, please complete the feedback form using this link.

I wish you every success with your activity.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Loukia Tsaprouni

On behalf of the Health, Education and Life Sciences Faculty Academic Ethics Committee