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Research article

‘It’s actually changed my perspective’: spaces for genuine dialogic surprise within the initial teacher education curriculum

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Abstract

In this article, we draw on Martin Buber’s idea of dialogical surprise in educational experiences to consider curriculum design in initial teacher education. We argue that the current policy environment in England fosters a monological approach, stifling meaning-making and innovation. Contributing to conversations around initial teacher education curriculum design within a constricted policy environment in England, the research presents findings on initial teacher education curriculum experiences of Year 3 Primary Education undergraduate student teachers who completed one of three module electives (Thinking and Philosophy for Children; Creativity in Education; Early Years Education). These modules form part of the wider initial teacher education curriculum design at the institution in which the research was undertaken, aiming to develop student teachers’ critical thinking, reflection and personal philosophies. The study investigates

student teachers' reflections on participating in dialogue, which involves recognising their own and other perspectives. When curriculum design enabled spaces for new meanings to emerge, the possibility for an interplay of voices was allowed. Arguing that dialogic spaces are effectively closed down within the Department for Education's main prescribed initial teacher education framework, we add our voices to the urgent call for a less prescriptive framework which recognises the professional expertise of teacher educators in curriculum design.

Keywords Martin Buber; dialogism; primary education; ITT policy; curriculum design

Introduction

This research draws on the dialogism theories of German Jewish scholar Martin Buber as a lens to consider curriculum development in the light of recent policy reforms in initial teacher education (ITE) in England. According to Buber (2002), new understandings and insights are to be found through the interplay of voices when teacher educators and student teachers respond mutually and attentively to each other, resulting in genuine surprise. Bakhtin's work focuses on speech and dialogic talk, which he argues acts as a tool for co-constructions and transformation of knowledge and understanding between educators and students (Bakhtin, 2010). We argue that, in contrast, current initial teacher training (ITT) policy in England offers a monological vision of education. While there is literature exploring dialogic talk and Bakhtin's approach to this in ITE, Buber's work is less explored, as is the question of curriculum design to foster dialogism within an increasingly prescriptive policy environment. In this article, we aim to contribute to conversations around curriculum design with particular reference to Buber's notion of surprise in education.

We also present findings on ITE curriculum experiences of Year 3 Primary Education undergraduate student teachers. Through semi-structured interviews, we gathered qualitative data to examine the extent to which our elective modules offer space for genuine transformative and 'surprising' engagement. This research adds to knowledge on curriculum design and opportunities for teacher educators to demonstrate and model dialogic practice as a form of professional learning (Steadman, 2023).

Through the lens of Buber's notion of *surprise* in education, we consider if and how approaches for dialogic surprise can be included within the ITE curriculum, and how the students respond to them. We consider opportunities for genuine engagement where an interplay of voices between educators and students provides spaces for mutual surprise as knowledge and understanding is negotiated, co-constructed, contested and transformed. In particular, this research explores how the design and delivery of the elective modules impacts and is reflected in student teachers' future practice in the classroom, allowing them to open up spaces for genuine and surprising dialogue with their pupils.

Policy context: a monologic framework

In England, government policy change has fundamentally reshaped the curriculum within ITE. Since the Education White Paper (Department for Education, 2010), university-led teacher education has been devalued, with training deregulated and outsourced to the private sector (Worton, 2020). Such marketisation positions have developed a tightly regulated, centrally controlled, micromanaged and de-professionalised sector (Ellis, 2023; Pierlejewski et al., 2024). Compliance requires ITE-accredited providers with awarding status for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) to design and 'deliver' curriculum which adheres to prioritised 'scientific' evidence from psychology and neuroscience to the exclusion of broader evidence from the discipline of education and studies of classroom practice (Helgetun and Menter, 2020; Vickers-Hulse et al., 2024). The *ITT market review report* (Department for Education, 2021) and policy paper *Delivering world class teacher development* (Department for Education, 2022) established a requirement for ITE providers to apply for reaccreditation to maintain their awarding status for QTS. Reaccreditation processes require evidence submission of ITE curriculum teaching materials, including how curriculum design meets the requirements of the government's ITT Core Content Framework

(Department for Education, 2019, 2022) and, since 2024, the updated Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF) (Department for Education, 2024). This raises concerns for ITE educators as strict adherence and alignment to the ITTECF may result in an experience of *instrumental trainability* for student teachers, with the *official pedagogy* of the framework marginalising the intellectual and foundational concepts of teacher education and creating a perception of teaching as a *technical performance*, which does not fully grasp the context of teachers' work (Hordern and Brooks, 2023).

The marketisation of ITE with its associated reaccreditation process could be conceptualised as a monologic approach, in other words, an approach that is 'crafted to minimize the possibility that it will be transformed in uptake' (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 6). Such an approach to ITE may be at the expense of dialogic and competing views, and evidence based on teaching and learning, leading to limited opportunities for student teachers to develop reflective, creative and critical thinking skills, and agency (Vickers-Hulse et al., 2024).

The current policy approach, and the vision of education implied within it, could be described as 'technological' because it 'focuses on guiding students along some well- or ill-defined learning trajectory to arrive at preset curriculum endpoints' (Matusov et al., 2016, p. 164). This involves the need for student teachers to have clear end points for a learning session so that they, as the framework outlines, rehearse, practise and refine foundational knowledge and skills outlined in 'Learn that' and 'Learn how to' statements in the classroom, and discuss, analyse, observe and deconstruct such approaches with those deemed to be expert colleagues. While the framework has the potential to provide student teachers with opportunities to critically engage with the teaching and learning approaches it advocates, it requires the teaching of what some may consider monological and exclusive philosophical and pedagogical viewpoints of best practice in education, which draw on research evidence and literature which are deemed seminal by government, or government-funded projects, such as the Education Endowment Foundation.

We argue that the framework's 'Learn that' and 'Learn how to' statements create a monologic narrative which simplifies the intricacies of teaching and learning, relying on reduced research findings rather than capturing the complexities of how students learn (Hordern and Brooks, 2023; Pierlejewski et al., 2024, p. 2). This 'teaching by numbers' (Taubman, 2009, p. 7) approach leads to 'learnification' (Biesta, 2022, pp. 60–3) where teaching is reduced to the impact on pupil assessment outcomes, ignoring broader understandings of the purposes of education or opportunities for personal meaning-making. In this transmissive view of teaching, there is little room for the unexpected, for innovative thinking or for surprise. In contrast, dialogic teaching is 'always and necessarily open to contradiction and tension, to be open to learning through exchange' (Janfada et al., 2022, p. 388).

The need for dialogism with ITE primary curriculum design

Research into classroom teaching acknowledges that dialogic practices are key to learning. Much of this research draws on the work of Bakhtin (1986, 2010), who understands language as a living process constituted by multiple voices. This work has given rise to knowledge around creating opportunities for dialogue and discussion, in the form of higher-level thinking such as exploratory talk (Barnes, 1976), talk for learning (Mercer, 2000) and dialogic talk (Alexander, 2008), which are well-established pedagogies in education. This research, however, does not form part of the evidence base of the framework. Researchers drawing on dialogism theory in ITE or teacher education more widely consider the speech act and how multiple voices might be given space in learning experiences. For example, Guzman and Larrain (2021) discuss the challenges of embedding dialogic teaching in classroom practice as a speech repertoire which privileges discussion and dialogue. Taking an expansive view of dialogical practice in initial teacher education, Janfada et al. (2022) argue that it goes beyond talk with pre-service teachers in a one size-fits-all template. Rothwell (2024) explores the use of talk and teaching of oracy in the context of widening participation in academia. Dialogic engagement, she argues, is more likely when the quality of relationships and social and affective aspects of learning are addressed, when there is perceived equality between students and when teaching practices contribute to the 'formation of safe learning spaces' (Rothwell, 2024, p. 458) in which students are empowered to take risks. Highlighting the ontological and epistemological, 'ways of knowing, doing, being and becoming', Janfada et al. (2022) suggest that a dialogic approach is one that 'moves responsively to being able to seize moments of potential dialogue, due to a disposition that demonstrates respect and openness to other ways of knowing' (p. 383).

Buber and spaces for mutual surprise in curriculum design

Buber views surprise in education as a *genuine dialogue* where mutual interaction between teacher educator and student teacher(s) is maintained. He proposes that, through authentic moments of surprise facilitated by educators, students' critical and creative thinking and agency is developed so that students are 'wholly alive and able to communicate [themselves] directly' (Buber, 2002, p. 105). According to Buber (2002), a 'real lesson' is 'neither a routine repetition nor a lesson whose findings the teacher knows before he starts, but one which develops in mutual surprises' (p. 241). For Buber, surprise, which must be mutual between educators and students, plays a central role in education as it creates hope and creativity for the future. It is born of genuine dialogue and a 'turning towards the other' (Johnson, 2020), where mutual interaction between educators and students is maintained, enabling different and multiple voices to engage in reflective, critical and creative thinking.

Drawing on the work of Buber, Stern (2013) notes, 'if teachers only ask questions to which they know the answers, they are unlikely to be surprised, and their students are unlikely to feel that they – the students – are really making sense of the world' (p. 49). Stern (2013) highlights the importance of curriculum design that provides some space for the surprising or unexpected, arguing that controlling and overly structured approaches deny the possibility of spontaneity and meaningful expression by students of self and of deep connection with others.

ITE curriculum

While ITE-accredited providers must align experiences and activities detailed in the framework into a coherent curriculum to provide student teachers with the full entitlement of the framework, they can also integrate 'additional analysis and critique of theory, research and expert practice' (Department for Education, 2019, p. 4). As a reaccredited ITT provider, teacher educators at York St John University have adapted the curriculum to ensure compliance with the evidence base which the framework draws on, while creating spaces in the curriculum for pedagogical opportunities for wider and competing educational research evidence and theories. Within this approach, student processes of meaning-making, critical thinking and developing personal philosophies of education through exposure to a variety of theories and approaches are given high importance. We argue that one way of ensuring such processes is through designing some spaces within the overall structure for dialogic encounters with no pre-engineered end points, ensuring that a key focus of the curriculum is on developing students' reflective, creative, critical thinking skills and personal philosophies of education as part of the curriculum model.

Modules in the programme have been designed with this professional development of students in mind. Year 3 students choose one elective from a suite of the following options: Thinking and Philosophy for Children, Creativity in Education, Early Years Education and Learning Outside the Classroom. For the purposes of this research, we have focused on the first three listed elective modules as, due to the nature of classroom-based learning, we felt these particular electives provided more opportunity to consider how dialogism acts as a tool to enable space for genuine and surprising engagement between educators and students. We excluded Learning Outside the Classroom because of the unique nature of its delivery.

Methodology

This project takes the form of a descriptive case study structure (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 13) to provide greater insight and understanding into the design and delivery of the elective modules (Rozsahegyi, 2019, p. 124). Voluntary group interviews of students who had completed the modules were led by teacher educators in May 2023. Interview group sizes varied depending on elective modules and student engagement in attending interviews, with two students participating in the interview for Philosophy and Thinking for Children (Students 1 and 2), four for Creativity in Primary Education (Students 3, 4, 5 and 6) and one for Early Years Education (Student 7). As a retrospective study in its design, data are based on respondents' recall of the modules with which they engaged between September 2022 and January 2023.

To recruit participants, the researchers invited by email student teachers who had completed the elective modules to attend an online interview. Taking into account power relationships between teacher educators and student teachers, recruitment took place after student teachers had completed their

university programme. Informed consent was gained from participants. Participation was voluntary and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research if desired. Participants were told about the aims, methods of data collection and intended uses of the data collected. Responses were recorded electronically, with participants' permission, to create a transcript on Microsoft Teams to allow a thorough understanding of meanings and key issues (Creswell, 2012, p. 244).

Anonymity and confidentiality were kept in mind at all times, as sensitivity to the views and opinions which students expressed sometimes revealed dissatisfaction with experiences on electives or personal views (BERA, 2018; Data Protection Act, 2018). The project gained ethical approval from the ethics committee of the School of Education, Language and Psychology, York St John University.

One challenge was having a shared language around the concept of genuine dialogic surprise so that the researchers could reach a situation where the interviewees' interpretation was similar to that of the researchers. Thus, the teacher educators clarified for students Buber's idea of surprise as a *genuine dialogue* where mutual interaction between educator and student(s) is maintained. This led to interviewees explaining the role of dialogic surprise in education from their perspectives, drawing on examples where they may have experienced moments of dialogic surprise within the elective module where both teacher educators and students were mutually surprised. Later interview questions also elicited examples of how teacher educators and student teachers created or facilitated dialogic surprise for others, and how student teachers may facilitate dialogic surprise for pupils in their classrooms.

From the qualitative interview data, the researchers identified emerging themes and patterns from responses and created meaning from them (Check and Schutt, 2012, p. 11) in relation to dialogical theory and Buber's notion of surprise in education. The researchers' thematic data analysis approach involved data familiarisation, through the recording and transcription of interviews, the generation of initial codes in order to search for themes as well as reviewing themes, defining and naming these to produce the research report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Researchers went through the data systemically, line by line, and wrote descriptive codes, with each code related to specific ideas that emerged which identified student teachers' common experiences and perspectives and where these diverge.

Ours was a small-scale case study and our findings are not generalisable. However, Bassey (1999, pp. 51–4) uses the term *fuzzy generalizations* to convey the element of uncertainty and contingency in knowledge generated by case study research. Such research offers reliability in the form of its 'relatability', suggesting that insights generated in one context may be relevant in other contexts.

Findings and analysis

Thinking and Philosophy for Children

Aim of the module

The elective module Thinking and Philosophy for Children draws on Level 1 SAPERE (Society for Philosophical Enquiry) training to enable an approach to teaching and learning that explores the big ideas that arise in all areas of education and life experience. The module models the use of philosophical dialogic enquiries that are also seen in school-based Philosophy for Children (P4C) lessons. Initially these are facilitated by teacher educators before the student teachers become facilitators. P4C enquiries make use of language as 'the crucial medium' (Smith, 2010, p. 22) through which ideas are shaped and expressed, and participants are given both opportunity and space to consider philosophical ideas in greater depth without the need for curriculum coverage.

Following SAPERE guidance, each philosophical enquiry in the module begins with the sharing of a stimulus, followed by the identification of connected philosophical concepts and then the formulation of questions that capture what the participants find curious. The class then selects a question of interest which informs the following discussion. The role of the teacher educator is to facilitate rather than lead this discussion, and the focus is on raising critical consciousness, questioning, exploring alternatives and maintaining a critical and curious approach (Bowers, 2005). As such, there is space for potential surprise for all as they experience new perspectives and ways of thinking (Işıklar and Abalı-Öztürk, 2022) through 'informed, rational and honest disagreement' (Floridi, 2013, p. 195).

In the interview, two student teachers (Students 1 and 2) revealed three key observations about the P4C module, and in particular about the experience of P4C enquiries: the lasting impression of

philosophical dialogic surprise, the limitations in achieving truly open dialogic exchanges and the role of the primary teacher as facilitator to allow for moments of genuine dialogic surprise within the classroom.

Lasting impressions of philosophical dialogue

One notable philosophical enquiry on the module was around the concept of beauty. As a stimulus, the student teachers were shown a video prompt of a woman's physical form being edited and filtered to meet what might be perceived as idealised beauty standards. The student teachers reflected back on it a number of times, suggesting that it had made a lasting impression and had led to surprising or unexpected shifts in their own thinking. Student 1 commented that the enquiry 'really stuck with me' and 'actually changed my perspective' because 'hearing others' opinions and how they articulate it and then integrating it into your view has been quite thought provoking for me'. This student felt that their eyes had been 'opened up' to new ways of thinking. The use of the metaphor 'opened up' not only implies new insights; it is also a typical facial expression to indicate surprise, suggesting that the dialogic interplay of unexpected perspectives was genuinely surprising (Buber, 2002).

Limits to achieving genuine dialogic exchanges

Conversely, both Student 1 (female) and Student 2 (male) felt somewhat restrained in being able to truly express their perspectives among peers. This suggests a limitation in these module enquiries as a vehicle for genuine dialogue; participants may not always feel able to contribute responses through truly open debate. Even though P4C privileges dialogue, the necessary safe spaces (Rothwell, 2024) may not always be present for all voices to be mutually expressed and heard. While this indicates a sensitivity to and respect for the needs of others within the group, arguably necessary in relational dialogue (Rule, 2011), it also reduces opportunities for genuine surprise as participants are more likely to focus on commonality rather than on difference.

Student 2 commented that, because only two males took part in the module, he felt some females were generalising about men's views on female beauty and media representation. As such, he chose to self-edit what he said in case he offended female participants: 'I would remove myself because I knew that I wasn't sure how it had landed.' This suggests that a degree of self-censorship is occurring throughout the dialogue, with participants choosing what to reveal depending on audience.

Student 1 also felt a sense of discomfort in the debate, which affected her ability to truly articulate herself, commenting that she felt raw and upset with some participants' views that she deemed to be 'narrow-minded'. This response is also indicative of surprise, but an uncomfortable surprise likely to close down debate. It also represents some of the challenges with encouraging democratic debate when this appears to be at the expense of empathising with other people's perspectives, particularly when speaking one's mind may feel uncomfortable (Haynes and Murris, 2009). Thus, there may be a need to acknowledge that genuine dialogue will also include moments of discomfort (Moate and Vass, 2023).

The role of the educator as facilitator

One of the challenges in the delivery of P4C lies in the role of the teacher as facilitator. Perhaps as a consequence of the monologic education sector described earlier, student teachers may perceive the teacher educator as the More Knowledgeable Other, and so struggle with the ambition for an equitable, collective and reciprocal dialogue (Cuo and Teo, 2020) within P4C enquiries. Student 1 reflected a much more monologic view, stating that as teachers 'we've got to get this content across, which means I've got to know this and then transfer that across to [the children], and that's what I've got to do'. For this student teacher, it was often challenging to hand over control of learning to others when engineering philosophical dialogue. This can be understood as the difference between 'monologically authoritarian and dialogically authoritative' (Elbra-Ramsay, 2025, p. 7). Student 1 reflected on her facilitation of a P4C enquiry within the module, commenting that she was 'not always in control, but I don't think that's a bad thing really'. In the role of facilitator, the student teacher tailored the enquiry to what learners wanted to discuss so that 'they find something in that lesson that is more thought provoking than what I would have thought of' and, as such, provoke meaningful dialogue. This resulted in moments of surprise not only for the learners, but also for the teacher. She stated that learners 'know they're expressing their opinions, and they understand you as much as you understand them', sending her (as the teacher) on a surprising

and mutual 'learning journey as much as it does the kids'. For the student teachers, the distinctly different roles within the module enquiries therefore supported moments of surprising dialogue for both student teacher and teacher educator.

Creativity in Education

Aim of the module

The Creativity in Education module aims to support student teachers to develop their emerging ideas about creativity, exploring creative approaches to teaching and learning as part of effective pedagogy. Creativity is a contested (Grigg and Lewis, 2019) and 'slippery' concept, with differing perspectives and definitions found in fields such as psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), neuroscience (Fuster, 2013), education (Craft, 2015; Robinson, 2017; Starko, 2017) and psychoanalysis (Ruti, 2009). The module develops student teachers' critical understanding of creativity as a concept as, if students better understand creativity as a concept, they are better placed to promote it, understand children's creativity and develop their own creativity (Lucas, 2016).

Opportunities for surprise are designed into the module, for example, through dialogic exploration of contrasting perspectives and open-ended unstructured learning experiences. These approaches encourage safe learning spaces for surprise in learning (Rothwell, 2024). The interview with four student teachers (Students 3, 4, 5 and 6) revealed three key observations about the module in relation to dialogic surprise: the need to allow for the freedom for learners to be confused; how dialogue can promote reconsiderations of perceptions of learning and teaching; and the importance of planning questions for learning.

Allowing for the freedom to be confused

The open-ended, challenging and critical explorations of definitions of creativity presented key opportunities for dialogic surprise. From the interview, students recognised that discussions about the interpretation or definition of creativity which were facilitated rather than directed by the teacher educator avoided pushing students towards single or predetermined perspectives and prevented judgements about right and wrong responses. Dialogic conversations delved into complex concepts, leading Student 3 'onto something deeper', illuminating or clarifying complex concepts. While for Student 4, the tangential nature of discussion, or the plethora of opinions, did, at times, muddy the learning experience, resulting in a 'loss of interest and concentration', they mostly valued the freedom to be confused, and they acknowledged that tangential talk offers an opportunity to ask questions and, as Student 5 stated, 'get help'. As Sutton (2009) argues, dialogism can encompass not only dialogue that facilitates meaning but also processes that allow us to become ourselves, suggesting that students recognised this as an important aspect and potential aim of education conversations. Such lessons were ones which Buber (2002) characterises as 'real', where there is mutual surprise, with opportunities for teacher and students to be responsive and pursue opportunities for dialogue as they arise (Rothwell, 2024).

Reconsidering perceptions of learning and teaching

An immersive session of the Mantle of the Expert approach (Heathcote and Bolton, 1995) produced the most reflection on genuine surprise from the interviewees. In role, the teacher educator presented a workplace scenario requiring students to work, in role, to achieve a collaborative goal. With the teacher educator acting as 'an enabler rather than a transmitter' (O'Neill, 2014, p. 112) and where traditional teacher/learner roles were blurred or even suspended, the activity created dialogic surprise for students. Student 6 commented: 'I think because we all got into our roles, that we were … actually thinking like what we'd actually do in this situation … we were actually putting ourselves in the situation and we were communicating like if we were actually doing that job.' The student further reflected that 'I think because of [the teacher educator's] seriousness … we took it seriously as well', indicating that a mutuality of behaviour is important in affording the conditions conducive to the success of the activity (Bakhtin, 2010). As suggested by Buber (2002), students' critical and creative thinking, communication and agency were developed by the authenticity of these moments of surprise and the genuine dialogue they produced.

Planning questions for learning

Opportunities arose from practical applications of models of creativity from literature, providing students with opportunities to diverge from their previous conceptions and experiences of planning learning and teaching, and to reflect on how they could make sense of potential new approaches. Student 4 expressed her intention to 'plan for open-ended questions', and Student 6 to 'not be afraid to where [the discussion] might go because you lack subject knowledge'. Student 5 articulated it as 'planning to be flexible', where teachers recognise the importance of learning outcomes and gauge in the moment when children 'just want to be told' the answer and when they do not. 'Planning a question that can create that discussion rather than a question that [has] got one right answer' was seen by Student 5 to be a way of facilitating genuine discussion that gets the children 'more involved in the actual learning'. Students appreciated situations in which conversations went in surprising and tangential directions, valuing the learning opportunities this afforded, and they recognised the benefit of unplanned, spontaneous conversation that brings understanding to the fore, not least because, as Student 5 expressed, 'it can pick up … misconceptions'.

Early Years Education

Aim of the module

The module aims to provide student teachers with opportunities to identify and articulate the principles of early years education. Early years education is distinctive in its focus and approaches from the later years of school life. As such it is underpinned by theoretical perspectives, frameworks and curricula that are also distinctive. As MacBlain (2025) argues, 'it is necessary to understand how thinking has changed over generations and how the building blocks of what we now understand of children's early development have led to how practitioners work and think today' (p. 13). It is also important to learn from practices in other countries, and how they manage this against political agendas/societal challenges; thus, the module addresses a range of early years theorists (for example, Froebel), approaches (Forest Schools) and curricula in different countries (Te Whariki in New Zealand). Throughout the module, student teachers are encouraged to make links to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (Department for Education, 2025) and to their own practice. Taking a critical approach to different practices, including this framework, they begin to draw their own conclusions about the potential and limitations of each, and how a blending of some ideas could lead to 'new' practices emerging, potentially in year groups beyond the EYFS. This leads to elements of surprise as discussions open up new realisations and possibilities for practice. The interview with the student teacher (Student 7) taking the Early Years Education module highlighted how dialogue helped to make links that had previously gone unnoticed, how teacher educators and peers were instrumental in this, and how use of dialogue can also be translated into practice when working with young children.

Making links that had previously gone unnoticed

The module follows a structure of a lecture followed by a seminar with the same focus, thus supporting a dialogic approach and allowing for what the student teacher described as 'powerful conversations'. Student 7 described how dialogue allowed the group to 'delve deeper' into the theory underpinning the different approaches, and how this could lead to much longer, 'big conversations' which were beneficial as the key points really stuck in her mind.

The participant spoke about how conversations with her peers during module sessions broadened her horizons and her view of early years education in England. She gave an example of discussing the use of Forest Schools in other countries, which had led her to feel that perhaps we overprotect children from harm or risk, something she had not previously believed to be the case. She saw the role of others in the group as imperative in her learning; the conversations were memorable 'because you don't know what is going to come up, the links that you are going to make'. Picking points out of people's conversations made her much more aware of different practices, for example, 'hearing other people's stories about how children can be independent and what's the best way that we can facilitate that in early years'.

However, placing such a big emphasis on the contributions of others can also pose a challenge to facilitating dialogic surprise. If the group members are of a quiet nature or are not familiar with each other, this can limit the discussions, supporting the view that dialogic engagement is more common

through quality relationships (Rothwell, 2024). This was a frustration for the participant: 'I feel like I almost dominated some of those debates because I was the only one who would speak or people tell me their ideas and then I would have to say them rather than a room full of people who were all talking about the same thing.'

It was evident that the teacher educator also played a key role as the facilitator of the dialogue, but this could work in two ways, allowing for mutual surprise through genuine dialogue (Buber, 2002). As Student 7 stated, 'they [the teacher educator] can make you think in that way or you can make them think differently'. The participant felt that active facilitation by the teacher educator was often needed to encourage quieter members of the group to contribute, thus enabling multiple voices to be heard.

Using dialogue in practice

Student 7 spoke about how having some input initially, in the form of a lecture, allowed time for students to consider what they had learnt and how it linked to their own practice. She reflected on this as an approach to use with children too, giving them ownership of their learning through dialogue; she explained that it is about 'timing it right … to make sure the children have the resources that they need to then be able to do the talking instead of going straight in and say right, let's all talk about this big idea'. She also highlighted how conversations with children are important as they may see things differently to adults: 'Other people have ideas that you don't think about, so it's like when you teach in a classroom, you do something, and then the children say to me [and] you think I've never actually looked at it like that.' This further supports the idea of allowing space within curriculum design for the unexpected and for flexibility of approach. The EYFS curriculum is focused upon a child-centred approach with capacity to shape learning based on children's needs and interests (Department for Education, 2025). The ITTECF (Department for Education, 2024) places a strong emphasis on standardised teaching methods and measurable outcomes, which can inadvertently limit the flexibility required for truly child-centred approaches in early years education. By prioritising prescribed curricula and teacher-led instruction, the Framework may constrain educators' ability to fully respond to individual children's interests, needs and developmental trajectories.

Conclusion

In this article, we have considered opportunities for dialogic surprise in aspects of the ITE curriculum that are not part of the government's prescribed ITTECF, and we have shown that opportunities can be created for dialogic surprise and professional meaning-making in education in ways that engage students and deepen learning. Arguing that such dialogic spaces are effectively closed down within the main stipulated sections of the Framework, we add our voices to the urgent call for a less prescriptive framework which recognises the professional expertise of teacher educators in designing a curriculum that enables rather than constrains the creation of meaning. As an ITT-accredited provider, teacher educators in our institution have the professional confidence and duty to offer our student teachers a curriculum which is strengthened by novelty and interest, providing students with a rich knowledge base of primary practice to motivate them to foster a dialogic classroom for their own pupils, and supporting retention of teachers within the profession. When teacher educators or student teachers took risks in planning by handing over control of learning to student teachers or pupils, the possibility for tangential discussions and an interplay of voices was allowed. Our study shows that teacher educators' use of open-ended questions allows for moments of mutual surprise, often leaving a lasting impression on student teachers' perspectives. Such moments contribute to student teachers' confidence in their emerging practice, which is fundamental to their professional development. By encouraging engagement in diverse learning activities and proactive questioning, they enable intellectual curiosity to become deeply rooted and help transform learning into a 'joyful and positive thing' (Xu, 2022, p. 32). This can influence the trajectory of student teachers' developing practice as they participate in reciprocal dialogue, which involves recognising their own and others' divergent perspectives or considerations of concepts, often integrating these to further enhance their critical understanding when they are provided with space to think in depth and question dominant or monologic teaching and learning practices.

However, within the electives, a theme of restraint in relation to being able to fully express one's ideas was identified. There were also barriers in terms of student teachers' perceived lack of subject

knowledge and misconceptions in relation to topics, often resulting in a struggle to engage with and understand how to contribute fully within electives. In particular, where topics were more contentious, this led to barriers in an ability to fully express oneself. This raises questions around how teacher educators could further develop a motivating curriculum related to teacher preparation, education and development, how policy impacts on knowledge exchange, and how dialogic encounters, while essential, are at times difficult to achieve and are constrained by the technicisation of teacher education. The neo-liberal outcomes-based ideological values which have shaped ITT policy reforms (Cochran-Smith et al., 2008), aligning ITE with school improvement and accountability indicators, metrics and measures of quality (Bartell et al., 2018), conflict with the civic, moral and social democratic values of university education (Mead, 2024). The ITT Market Review in England moves ITE away from these democratic values of university education towards a monologic 'know how to' view of learning. However, the inclusion of the electives within the ITE curriculum dominated by the 'Learn that' and 'Learn how to' statements of the framework allows us to design an ITE curriculum which can work within the tightly regulated and controlled sector of ITT. While we recognise that, at times, true mutual dialogic surprise is hard to achieve, it is essential to provide opportunities for it to occur in order to move away from the learnification inherent within the framework and to prepare our primary teachers to have autonomy in their creation of dialogic-friendly classrooms.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

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

Consent for publication statement

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

Conflicts of interest statement

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

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