



How a process of subjectification in ITE can challenge the paradigm of the expert teacher in primary religious education

Elizabeth Yeomans¹ 

Received: 1 July 2025 / Revised: 6 September 2025 / Accepted: 17 September 2025
© The Author(s) 2025

Abstract

This longitudinal study challenges the assumption that an expert teacher with strong subject knowledge is the best solution to a lack of what the inspection agency Ofsted refer to as ‘deep and meaningful RE’ in England. The first cycle was a small-scale participatory action research project with five student teachers on an initial primary education (ITE) postgraduate degree course in the North-West of England. The concept of an expert teacher in primary religious education (RE) was explored by critiquing an image which had colonial connotations from the 2024 RE Council’s Handbook. The participants engaged in group discussions, beginning a process of Freire’s notion of conscientisation, by exploring what Biesta might call their own ‘subject-ness’. The result of the discussion was a co-created image designed to replace the image in the Handbook. The co-created image presents a pedagogical approach for use not just in the primary RE classroom but in primary ITE to encourage aspects of reflexivity and subjectivity through a Freirean dialogic approach. A new iteration of the image has been developed through a second cycle of action research, which consists of three loops: input from a new cohort; reflections from one member of the original group, now an early career teacher; and a meeting with the author of the Handbook, which demonstrates the significance of this project as it resulted in the removal of the original image.

Keywords Participatory · Subjectification · Decolonial · Student teacher · Dialogic

1 Introduction

Religious education is recognised as a subject that is not reaching its potential. This has been partly attributed to teachers’ lack of confidence (Ofsted, 2024; CORE, 2018). As a teacher educator, I wanted to interrogate the paradigm of the ‘expert’ teacher which is promoted in England’s Initial Teacher Training Early Career Framework (ITTECF, DfE, 2024), and may perpetuate this feeling of unease for teachers of primary RE. According to

✉ Elizabeth Yeomans
e.t.yeomans@ljmu.ac.uk

¹ School of Education, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, Merseyside, UK

the CORE Report (2018), the lack of confidence amongst primary teachers of RE ‘stems from inadequate training and a lack of subject knowledge’ (p. 45). The report highlights the lack of time in primary RE and recommends fully funded Subject Knowledge Enhancement. However, it is essential to consider the drastic changes in English Initial Teacher Education (ITE) since 2019 to fully understand the challenges for primary teachers of RE.

The introduction of the ITTCCF (DfE, 2019), renamed ITTECF in 2024, was set up by the National Institute of Teaching. This is an independent body which, before it was even launched, was heralded as a flagship model to inform how to educate teachers. Despite no organisational history or accumulated expertise as a teacher education provider (Daly, 2024), it provided the solution to the ‘problem’ of teacher education.¹ The ITTECF is a central policy framework for teacher development in England yet presents a narrow and simplified concept of teaching and learning. Throughout the ITTECF there is repetition, a lack of detail and no progression or critique in what it means to be a teacher, leading to an essentialist framing of what teachers need to know (Ellis & Childs, 2024). Turvey (2024) used discourse analysis software to reveal that concepts of learning are presented as working memory, long-term memory, retrieval practice and quizzing pupils for fluency. Cognitive load theory is prioritised and promoted unquestioningly, presenting a ‘fictional certainty’ (Turvey, 2024, p. 126) that it is the best theory. The ‘top-down’ approach to teacher education evident in the ITTECF expects teachers to unquestioningly accept the simplified version of cognitive load theory as all there is to know about teaching and learning.

This approach to teacher preparation, which is grounded in New Public Management (Daly, 2024), is an ill-fitting model for a subject like primary RE. The ITTECF has been branded as one of ‘the most radical and regressive reforms in the history of teacher education in England’ (Ellis & Childs, 2024). Student teachers are being taught that learning is total recall (Turvey et al., 2019). They are required to ‘learn that’, pupils learn complex ideas by memorising key facts which come from ‘expert colleagues’ (DfE, 2024). The ITTECF states that pupils should be required to ‘retrieve information from their memory... to strengthen recall’ (DfE, 2024). These examples show that learning is equated to remembering in the curriculum for teacher educators. This discourse can be traced to performative pedagogical approaches, where success is measured by regularly testing regurgitated ‘knowledge’. The effect of an essentialist framing of education can be oppressive in the context of RE. As Toni Morrison states (in Salami, 2023), ‘Oppressive language does more than represent violence, it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.’

The dominant approach to teaching and learning in primary RE currently is one in which content knowledge is prioritised, avoiding political and religious controversy. The problem with an over-emphasis on the educational domain of qualification is that the other educational domains of socialisation and subjectification are neglected (Biesta, 2010). This situation threatens the nature and purpose of RE. There is no space to explore questions that matter to pupils, teachers or their communities, or opportunities to engage with worldviews that may challenge or transform thinking. Further, religions are complex and diverse, and when simplified, it is common to represent the typical member of a religion (Gutierrez and Correa-Chavez, 2006), thereby transmitting identity prejudice (Beauchamp, 2023). This can lead to epistemic injustice (Stones & Fraser-Pearce, 2022), defined as being wronged in one’s capacity as a knower (Fricker, 2008). This can be further amplified

¹ For a thorough overview of the history of the struggle for state control in ITE since the 1980s, and the ‘constructed problem’ of a failing ITE see Ellis and Childs (2024).

when teachers are positioned as the ‘expert’ (DfE, 2024). Diverse pupil populations are not reflected in primary teacher populations, which means that the white dominant hegemony often remains dominant and unchallenged (Campbell and Stephenson, 2022). Although teacher impartiality is promoted in RE (Jackson & Everington, 2016), without space for self-examination, the worldview that is held by the teacher may still be evident, even if unconscious, in the teaching and learning choices (Biesta et al., 2015). Without ‘worldview shock’ (Flanagan, 2020), teachers will not be aware of their positionality and therefore may be unable to act impartially.

The conceptual framework of this research project was shaped by my critical reflection on the way student teachers are trained to teach primary RE. This illustrates the significance of the paper as my approach offers new insights for other teacher educators into how they might interrogate the ITTECF and review their perspectives, on themselves as teachers and of the subject of RE. The regressive impact of the ITTECF on primary RE can be likened to Freire’s analogy of the teacher depositing knowledge into the minds of pupils who are viewed as passive receptacles waiting to be ‘filled’ (Freire, 1970). In this paper I refer to this approach as monologic, which is defined as transmission of unchanging ideas (Bakhtin, 1984). The contrast of this approach with Freire’s dialogic approach as part of his liberatory theory led me to begin to explore emancipatory pedagogy as a way to challenge the current paradigm of the role of the teacher as expert and the impact this has in primary RE.

2 Research design

Cycle 1 of the action research project was inspired by an image from the REC Handbook (Pett, 2024).

The Commission on RE (2018) recommends that RE is taught from a religion and worldviews approach, which requires the teacher to become aware that they hold a worldview, whether religious or non-religious. The RE Council published a Handbook (Pett, 2024) to develop a religion and worldviews approach to teaching. An image was used which depicts an explorer with a backpack representing multidisciplinary tools such as scriptural interpretation (Fig. 1).

Initially, as a teacher educator, I liked the image, as it emphasises the importance of positionality and disciplinary and personal knowledge which are still neglected in primary RE (Ofsted, 2021). However, the use of an individual, perceived white male explorer was problematic to me. I was interested to explore whether my interpretation of Fig. 1 as a monologic, colonial approach to teaching RE was shared by the student teachers. I wanted to engage with them as equal participants, hear from them and work alongside them to create an image which could represent the social aspects of learning in RE from a liberatory theory approach.

2.1 Paradigm position

The design of the research was set within an interpretivist paradigm, with a focus on a critical theory-praxis approach (Pine, 2009). ‘Praxis’ is the combination of reflection and action on the world with an intention to transform it. Activism alone makes dialogue impossible (Freire, 1970), meaning praxis must involve an emphasis on social justice, leading to an absence of domination, and an empathetic understanding of an others’ point of view. Freire

Fig. 1 The image of an explorer, representing how to teach RE (Pett, 2024). © The Religious Education Council of England and Wales. (Used with permission from the Religious Education Council of England and Wales.)



saw teachers as ‘vulnerable actors’ (Barros, 2020 p. 158), where authentic dialogue with participants leads to a critical attempt to reveal reality, resulting in a discovery of oneself as part of the world.

However, as Hannam and Biesta (2019) make clear, it is essential to consider what it means to discover oneself as ‘part of the world’ in RE. They critique the language of the CORE (2018) report, specifically what it means to ‘understand’ religious and non-religious worldviews—highlighting philosophical, theological and political problems. They point out that understanding does not automatically equate to respect or care about an other; that the view of a human as a meaning-maker disregards a more religious definition of reality as revelation; and that positioning a pupil as an understander or interpreter of things set before them requires a recognition of transformational power. ‘Understanding’ means more than transmission of content, it requires both teacher and pupil to see themselves as equal human participants. Freire defined this as emancipation, calling for an analysis of the teacher–pupil relationship, reconciling the poles of contradiction so that both are student and teacher simultaneously (Freire, 2002; 1973). Emancipation entails a ‘rupture in the order of things’ (Rancière, 2003 in Biesta, 2016). It is achieved through a process of subjectification, which can be defined as ‘dis-identification’ with an existing order (Rancière 1995, in Biesta, 2016). Through subjectification, it becomes possible to establish a new social order, replacing the traditional inequality found in education. This aligned with my position, as I sought to understand and challenge the dominant discourse in ITE which is overly focused on the teacher as expert and the pupil as learner.

2.2 Ethics in research design

As an educator researcher, before I began this project, I prepared for ethics in practice (Macfarlane, 2009) by anticipating issues, engaging in reflexivity using my reflective journal, and planning and discussing the project with colleagues. I ensured participants were aware of the aims of the project and guaranteed anonymity (BERA, 2024). To further support the moral basis of my research, I engaged in a decision-making process, using an ethical grid (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009).

I considered the ethical context of the setting in which I work. I modelled a dialogic approach as I wanted to challenge the traditional student–lecturer role within the focus group. This position required me to be aware of my status as an insider–outsider researcher

and how this affected the responses of the students (Costley et al., 2010). To make this project authentically collaborative, I invited the student teachers to be co-constructors, which required me to give up some of my 'power' and invite some risk into the project (Costley et al., 2010). As the participants shared their experiences, I needed to continually be aware of my professional responsibilities, upholding my duty of care, the reputation of the university and placement schools that may be referred to in the data. I maintained respect and truth for participants (BERA 2024).

I needed cultural sensitivity (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009) as I was aware of potential participant reluctance to voice opinions which were critical of the course or placement schools. This could have been a negative consequence of the research. However, I considered this and weighed it up with the positive consequence of the participants having a small, shared space to critically reflect on their current and future practice. I felt that the benefits of the research outweighed the negative issues (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009). Another risk of the project was controversial or ideological personal views of the participants. Further, the RE Council may be offended if the group interprets Fig. 1 as colonial. This needed to be considered for the greater good, and I felt that the potential offence was outweighed by the validity of the findings. Integrity in the research was essential so that I did not waste others' time or resources.

3 Methodology

The methodology that fitted within my ontological position was participatory action research. A participatory action research approach can radically challenge the position of expert teacher (Lenette, 2022) and was therefore appropriate for this project whilst also demonstrating rigour (Elliott, 2007). This methodology encouraged student teachers to be inquirers about their own future classrooms (Pine, 2009). Part of the quality in participatory action research is its links with emancipatory education, emphasising it as a social process, which intentionally aims to challenge normative discourses.

After an RE teaching session all students were invited to be part of a participatory action research group to further explore the image I shared with them (Fig. 1). Initially 16 participants signed up, then 11 cancelled due to workload. This was anticipated, as the students were in the final phase of their one-year postgraduate teaching degree and were in full-time placement schools whilst also having assignments to complete. The five who attended were a mixed group of two white females (Claire and Niamh) and three white males (James, Conor and Will).²

Due to the cyclical nature of action research (see Fig. 2), I planned to continue the project with the participants as they progressed in their careers (Loop 1 of Cycle 2). Further, I designed a survey for the new cohort of student teachers to gain some feedback about the co-created image made by the first cohort (see Loop 2 of Cycle 2). Due to time restrictions, this was limited to an anonymous online survey, and did not have the rich relational data from Cycle 1. To assess impact, I also reached out to the author of the Handbook to share the students' interpretations of Fig. 1 and the new co-created image (Loop 3 of Cycle 2), see Fig 2.

² Only first names used as agreed with the student teachers. In the first write-up only initials were used but this was later changed to give the students more recognition as co-creators.

Cycle 1 was guided by a series of research questions (RQs):

1. How do student teachers engage with the current image for teaching RE?
2. How might critical reflection support participants in responding to the current image?
3. To what extent might participating in a focus group support the student teachers to develop their critical reflection in praxis?

The research was designed to address these questions as follows:

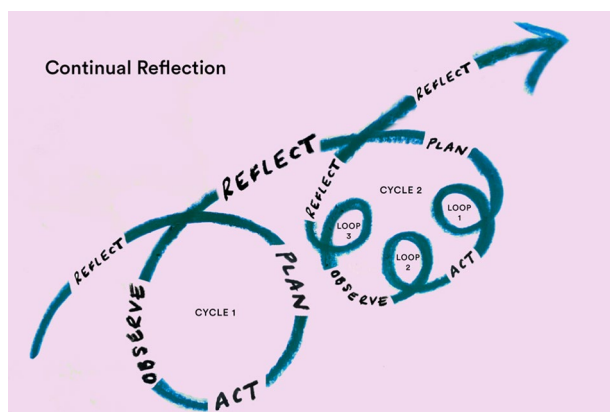
RQ1 required an informal group discussion to explore whether the participants' interpretations of Fig. 1 aligned with my interpretation. I intentionally chose a focus group method, so that we could engage in dialogue, impacting one another's thoughts as a community of participants (Jarvis, 2021).

RQ2 allowed me to become more specific in my aims, as I wanted the participants to move forwards and create new knowledge (Freire, 1984).

RQ3 pointed to the decolonising methodology of participatory action research (Lentte, 2022). This methodology would provide data to show whether a critical group reflection could begin to shape praxis by having participants work on themselves (Cohen et al., 2018). Additionally, it would give me data to explore whether we can begin a process of 'subjectification' (Biesta and Hannam, 2020). A semi-structured group interview followed the group discussion to allow participants time to answer specific questions and be further shaped by each other's responses.

To ensure confirmability, I shared the analysis of the discussion, semi-structured group interview and my own interpretations with the participants. I also ensured that they were able to communicate with me if they wanted to add or detract any comments after reflecting on my interpretations and the particular comments I felt were relevant to the research. They all concurred with the interpretations. A line of communication remained open throughout (and after) the data analysis. Triangulation of the data was achieved by a non-participating colleague who took field notes. However, my position of power was difficult to completely reduce, as we met on campus.

Fig. 2 Action Research Cycles.
(Illustration made for author by
Heather Almond, 2025)



3.1 Findings and discussion

Each of the cycles of the study are presented by cycle and/or loop, emphasising the voices of the student teacher participants.

Cycle 1: Initial Responses to Fig. 1

Initial responses to the image in the discussion included:

White man, Eurocentric. (Niamh)

English passport, Like the diary, Pilgrimage is better, Colonial. (Will)

Not for working classes. (James)

The semi-structured group interview provided more detailed analysis of the image:

Individual holds that power. (Claire)

Individual put on a pedestal. (Conor)

They've gone on a solo or very limited venture, maybe railroad other cultures a bit...

So it's this lone man coming in putting their perspectives on everything. (Niamh)

An emancipatory education, according to Freire, requires a decolonising approach which thinks critically (Freire, 1984, p. 543) rather than imposing 'knowledge from above' (Mayo, 2022 p. 2280). The explorer in the image is literally: "Up there and he's looking down and that's just like fundamentally wrong". (Conor)

Niamh found a problem with the way that pupils were given, "Facts to memorise... why would teachers do this?" She interpreted Fig. 1 to have "deep, hidden messages". This was expanded upon when she detailed how western explorers "railroaded" other cultures, and people relied on them for knowledge, and believed the accounts describing "uneducated or savage" natives. She suggested that a new image should "deviate from that stereotypical explorer". Her detailed response to the image provided a useful analogy of how damaging RE can be when it depends on one "lone" interpretation.

James described his initial response as "One person, one perspective, looking one direction."

This individual focus is incompatible with a dialogic approach.

3.2 Co-creation of a new image

To move away from the monologic approach and the teacher as expert, the role of the teacher as explorer (Fig. 1) began to be reimagined. The student teachers became the subject, recognising that as beginner teachers they have a worldview and they are not 'neutral' (Biesta, 2020; Freire, 1984). Niamh shared that:

I feel that I'm inclusive but I think it's wrong to say that I have no bias. I'm an atheist so I think I must have bias towards religion. I don't want to be ignorant.

Niamh was beginning to show aspects of self-reflexivity, as she recognised that belonging to a secular worldview did not position her as neutral (Keddie et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Within this moment there was a feeling of a transformational encounter (Campbell and Stephenson, 2022).

The process of subjectification and transformation was shared by Conor,

Teachers can be ignorant too...The thing is like the more you know the more you realise that you don't know.

Student teachers cannot change what they do not see (Picower, 2013). They are relatively powerless in their position in schools and are also influenced by the dominant transmission approach practice they observe on placement, which can be underpinned by ‘white ignorance’ (Chetty, 2018, p. 45). RE is more than content transmission, yet this is what student teachers expect in their training (Whitworth, 2020) and see on their placement (Revell, 2005).

Beginning a process of subjectification (Biesta et al., 2020), the participants started to ‘disidentify’ themselves from a teacher identity in the RE classroom. Together we sketched an image. Fig. 3, created during the discussion, featured four non-human figures with the world in the centre. The participants wanted the ‘people’ to have no identifiable characteristics. As James stated, Fig. 3: “Made me consider my role as an educator from a different perspective”.

Above each figure is a life world in a speech bubble. Behind is their individual path, leading to a shared sea. There is a sun and a thundercloud.

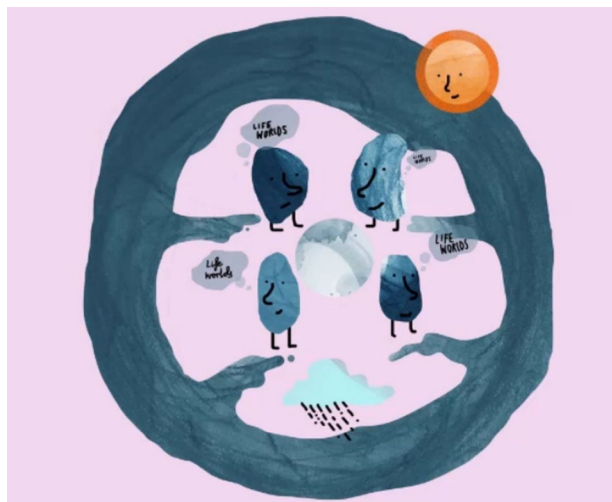
The inclusion of life worlds (Moll et al., 1992) in the image supports the dialogic vision of the teacher- pupil relationship, where both exist simultaneously on an equal level, (Freire, 2002). It is not clear who the teacher is in Fig. 3, or in which direction they are looking. A dialogic approach moves the power from the ‘expert’ teacher (DfE, 2024) to the “collective” (James). This means that the anxiety, which was apparent in the participants’ responses, is reduced:

Kids are anxious about getting something wrong. There’s always the pressure on getting something wrong. (James)

This aligns with the ‘necrophilic’ or ‘death-loving’ approach (Freire, 1984), where there is a correct answer held by the teacher. Freire contrasts this with a biophilic approach, which is life-affirming. I interpreted this as giving pupils freedom to think (Wegerif, 2010) and to slow down (Biesta, 2016). James continued this line of thought when he considered the importance of the figures looking in different directions:

So this image will help... kind of visualise being a collective. You might not always get exposed to everything in that image all at the same time. It depends which way

Fig. 3 A dialogic vision of the RE classroom (Co-created by Yeomans and student teachers, 2024. Illustration by Heather Almond for author.)



you're looking, but you have the opportunity to look at everything, see where other people are looking and maybe why they are looking that way. (James)

To be authentic, education needs to be democratised, to avoid pseudo-participation (Biesta, 2010; Freire, 1970), in which the outcomes are already set and controlled by the 'expert' teacher (DfE, 2024). If one voice has more dominance, then minority voices will be the ones which are self-limited, or silenced (Keddie, 2019; Chetty, 2018). The assumption that the classroom can be a safe space for all people needs to be challenged (Hooks, 1994) and recognising that the classroom is not a neutral setting is a step towards creating a more democratic space.

James commented on the sun and thundercloud in Fig. 3 which the participants had chosen to represent the 'weather' of the classroom. James called the thundercloud, "Embracing of the discomfort" of an RE classroom where there is not always a "right" answer. Niamh responded to this phrase:

I like this 'embracing of the discomfort' as I try very hard to make the classroom a very comfortable place. I would have missed out on important conversations. I love the fact that the uncomfortable weather has been included, because it shapes us into an experience. There are going to be things that you don't know.

This shift from being an 'expert' to 'embracing of the discomfort' echoes the call for school to be a place which nourishes and supports this painful process of learning how to encounter the world (Biesta, 2016). Biesta defines education as practising a way of life which consists of being in the world without putting your 'self' in the centre. He calls it an 'ex-centric' way of trying to exist (Biesta, 2016), and challenges educators to arouse in pupils a desire for wanting to exist in the world in a 'grown-up' way. He makes a clear distinction with moralising education, and, like Freire (1973), challenges teachers to move away from the authoritarian teacher paradigm, where teachers tell pupils what it means to be in the world.

Fromm (1941) also identifies the freedom of reality as painful and draws a parallel between changing from an infant to an adult and the process of human development in history. He calls this 'individuation', arguing that the human fight for individualisation and freedom has resulted in greater levels of isolation. According to Ofsted, getting better at RE means that pupils should 'know more and remember more' (Ofsted, 2021), which emphasises an individual learning process. Contrasting this claim with Biesta's view of education as an encounter with reality reveals the importance of the social setting of the classroom and life itself. Spirituality and meaning needs space to be represented. Fromm argues that a solution to the painful reality of freedom is love, which is echoed in Freire's *Principles for Dialogue* (1970). Love is defined as an ongoing commitment to the other (Fromm, 1941). The co-created image (Fig. 3) emphasises the importance of social connection. Hooks (1994) calls this engaged pedagogy, which can be formed through relationships and result in conscientisation, whereby participants (teachers and pupils) become aware of the need for critical thinking through dialogue.

Claire used Fig. 3 to expand on the theme of dialogue:

Dialogic teaching... it's not like individualism versus collectivism, but almost, how you move forward... you listen to each other. Your way of teaching is I'm just going to share with you facts (Fig. 1). Everyone sort of been on a journey and bring their collective viewpoints together (Fig. 3) ... You start with like the world and then the people around it, we built from that - we have the life world then you feed that back in like through dialogue. Two-way conversation that you have is part of lessons.

What you have to share and then being able to take that back and then feed that back in.

This two-way dialogue means that pupils and the teacher can relate their own concerns to the wider cultural community, and then back to themselves, and then out again, being both part of a family culture and also independent from it (Leganger-Krogstad, 2003). They do not lose their individuality but have an authentic connection with their school and wider community.

Finally, Will made a comment to summarise his initial response to Fig. 1:

You think ‘that would be good and useful thing’ and then you kind of *get on with it* and make the lesson but actually think yeah, he’s white... it might be obvious but just be inclusive of everyone.

Subjectification requires seeing oneself as a subject (Biesta, 2020). This relates to being authentically aware of the world ‘as it really is’ (Freire, 1984 p. 543) and then acting on it. The participatory action research group gave space for the image to be critically engaged with, rather than expecting student teachers to just get ‘on with it’.

Cycle 2: Impact.

Cycle 2 consisted of three loops of research.

3.3 Loop 1

I shared Fig. 3 with a new cohort of postgraduate student teachers and used an online anonymous survey to ask, "What do you think of the new image of the RE classroom created by last year’s students?" Overall, the responses were positive. However, some felt that the image “needs explanation”.

Conscientisation is a constant state of reflection (Freire, 1974), and I feel that I also became aware of myself as a subject and engaged in a critically conscious process. I used the Handbook (Pett, 2024), to enhance Fig. 3, as I agreed with the new cohort that it does not communicate the essence of the academic transformative power of RE and needed further explanation (see Fig. 4).

3.4 Loop 2

As set out in the research design, I was able to return to the original participants to ask them if the project had impacted their practice.

James emailed me to tell me about a lesson where he had encouraged Muslim children in his class to share their beliefs about creation. He told the class that:

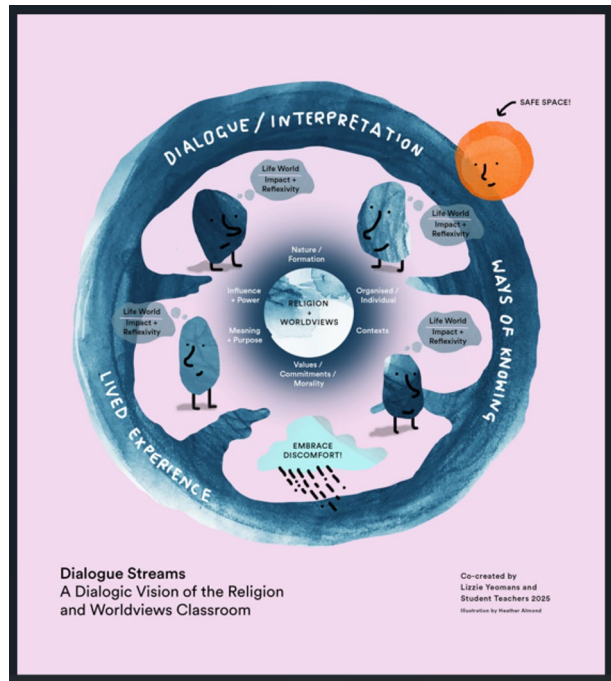
RE is a lovely lesson because there will be children in here that can share their knowledge, and it might be things I don’t know.

This ties in with the importance of teacher humility (Freire, 1970). I asked James,

Do you feel like you would have taught like that anyway or do you think that the research group impacted you to be reflective about the type of RE teacher you wanted to be?

He replied,

Fig. 4 A dialogic vision of the RE classroom iteration (New image used language from the REC Handbook 2024)



To be honest I’m not sure I would have, one of the biggest questions I grappled with during teacher training is how much humility you should have in general as a teacher as there’s the preconception of having to have all the answers and be a ‘perfect role model’ so having these discussions definitely made me think about it.

The project impacted James’ practice, helping him to realise through dialogic practice with fellow student teachers that he does not have to have ‘all of the answers’ and he can dis-identify with the traditional view of the teacher in RE. Inviting pupils in his class to share their ‘life worlds’ (Moll et al., 1992) meant that exploring knowledge as subjectification, as revealed in the project, can be mirrored in the classroom.

3.5 Loop 3

For Loop 3, I shared the student teachers’ responses to Fig. 1 with the writer of the Handbook, Stephen Pett.³ We arranged an online call using Microsoft Teams, and he was clearly surprised by the responses. Stephen proceeded to share his initial design for the image, which had been given to the designers as the stimulus for the Handbook but not used because of copyright issues. It represented a South-East Asian female climbing up a mountain.

³ Author agreed to name and comments being used.

If this image had been used in the REC toolkit, the research project would not have had the same impact. The explorer would have been climbing up, not looking down as if “on a pedestal” (Conor). They would not have been a “white male, reflecting colonial power” (Will). However, the image would still be problematic in its individuality, which does not reflect social contexts of learning. The individual is still “looking one way” (James). The connotation of an explorer collecting information is still inadvertently “monologic” (Niamh).

A few months after the Microsoft Teams call, Stephen emailed me to tell me that he has stopped using Fig. 1:

It was so valuable to read the research and hear about how the Handbook illustration had been interpreted. That page is an important one for communicating the process of a religion and worldviews approach, so I regret the negative connotations of the illustration. In presentations I now substitute the image (Pett, 2024).

The removal of the white male explorer image from the REC Handbook demonstrates the impact of the research project on the wider RE community, as the student teacher voice has resonated with the author. He now uses an image which shows a group of students walking with backpacks.

3.6 Evaluation of research methods

At the start of the project, as a reflexive educator researcher, I kept a journal to make notes of the changes I made in sessions. I became more focused on using a dialogic approach as a conceptual framework. I purposefully changed my practice, using more open questions in smaller groups, allowing time for perspective sharing (Rix and Paige Smith, 2011). I used music during reflective tasks, and imaginative scenarios for stimulating discussions (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2009). The participants who joined the project were all in my tutor group. Our well-established relationship, and the changes to my practice to be more intentionally relational may have been the reason that they signed up (Miller, 2020).

Although this is a small-scale study with just five participants, there was a robust methodology and none of the participants disagreed with or challenged my findings. The project offers an original approach with transferability for others interested in adopting a participatory action research methodology. The project authentically embedded a dialogic approach, reducing the power of the lecturer, and elevating the student voice. Relationships were formed and strengthened through the process, and new knowledge was successfully created in the form of an image which has impacted the wider RE community.

4 Conclusion

The critical reflection involved in this project resulted in two cycles of action research for engaging with a dialogic approach to teaching RE in an English primary school. The significance of this project relates to the research design, which resulted in a co-created image, corresponding to Freire’s principles of dialogue (Freire, 1970). It also inadvertently resulted in an image which correlated to Biesta’s call for an ‘ex-centric’ approach to education, where pupils are motivated to live in a way that puts the world in the centre, rather than themselves (Biesta, 2016).

The dialogic approach does not suggest that anyone's rights to their own beliefs should be removed, in fact the opposite. The research project promotes the importance for student teachers to recognise and critically reflect on their own need for emancipation during the crucial time of ITE (Biesta, 2017). This project is unique, as it responds to recommendations from the RE community that:

1. ITE should provide space to encounter one's own 'tradition,' connecting past, present and future life worlds (Jackson, 2004);
2. There should be time for teachers to identify any assumptions, preconceptions or prejudices (Biesta et al., 2015);
3. We need to challenge any approach that degrades the teacher to facilitator or technician (Hannam & Biesta, 2019).

In responding to these recommendations, it challenges the language of the ITTECF, which positions primary teachers as 'experts,' without a grounding in RE appropriate learning theory.

This approach has demonstrated, through the inclusion of the thundercloud, that it is not easy or comfortable for educators or pupils to encounter resistance to one's own life world, whether religious or non-religious. By encountering the unfamiliar and being confronted with our own responses to reality (Biesta, 2016), we can embrace the discomfort of teacher vulnerability and build bridges through social connections.

This requires an important new paradigm in teacher education, where the teacher is no longer seen as a lone 'master explainer' (Rancière, 1991, in Biesta, 2016) in RE, but as a curious subject alongside pupils, engaging with a range of truth claims through substantive, disciplinary and personal knowledge. Whilst the REC Handbook does this well, providing a framework of example questions for teachers to authentically engage with before planning a unit of work (Pett, 2024), it would be even better if teachers were encouraged to do it in a social setting, recognising that 'we' teachers and pupils exist in pluralistic relational communities and our worldviews are not fixed, but active and evolving through ongoing dialogue and social praxis.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares there is no conflict of interest. The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

Bakhtin, M.M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (edited and trans. By Emerson, C.). University of Michigan Press.

- Barros, S. (2020). Paulo Freire in a hall of mirrors. *Educational Theory*, 70(2), 151–169. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12413>
- Beauchamp, G. (2023). Epistemic injustice as a ground for religious education in public schools. *Religious Education*, 118(2) 119–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2023.2181916>
- Biesta, G. (2010). ‘This is My Truth, Tell Me Yours’ Deconstructive pragmatism as a philosophy for education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 42(7), 710–727. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2008.00422.x>
- Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, S. (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(6), 624–640. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044325>
- Biesta, G. (2016). *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Biesta, G. (2017). Don’t be fooled by ignorant schoolmasters: On the role of the teacher in emancipatory education. *Policy Futures in Education*, 15(1), 52–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210316681202>
- Biesta, G. (2020). ‘Education, Education, Education: Reflections on a Missing Dimension’ in Biesta G., & Hannam, P. (eds), *Religion and Education*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004446397>
- British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2024). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, fifth edition*. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-fifth-edition-2024-online>
- Campbell, M., & Stevenson, P. (2022). Engaging with Media Constructs and Power Dimensions in Initial Teacher Education: Enabling Student Teachers to Challenge Stereotypical Representations of Minorities in the Classroom. In: Ranieri, M., Pellegrini, M., Menichetti, L., Roffi, A., Luzzi, D. (eds) *Social Justice, Media and Technology in Teacher Education*. ATEE 2021. Communications in Computer and Information Science, vol 1649. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20777-8_2
- Chetty, D. (2018). Racism as ‘Reasonableness’: Philosophy for children and the gated community of inquiry. *Ethics and Education*, 13(1), 39–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2018.1430933>
- Commission on Religious Education, (2018). Final Report: Religion and worldviews: The way forward <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/final-report-religion-and-worldviews-the-way-forward-a-national-plan-for-re/>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education: Eighth edition*. Routledge.
- Costley, C., Elliott, G., & Gibbs, P. (2010). ‘Key Concepts for the insider-researcher’ in *Doing Work Based Research*. Sage.
- Daly, C. (2024). ‘The National Institute of Teaching and the Claim for Programme Legitimacy’ in *Teacher Education in Crisis: The State, the Market and the Universities in England*. Ellis, V. (ed), 1st edn (2024). Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Department for Education (DfE). Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974307/ITT_core_content_framework_.pdf (2019).
- Department for Education (DfE) (2024). Initial teacher training and early career framework: A framework to support trainee and early career teacher development. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-and-early-career-framework>.
- Elliott, J. (2007). Assessing the quality of action research. In *Assessing quality in applied and practice-based research in education*. Routledge.
- Ellis, V., & Childs, A. (2024). Introducing the crisis: The state, the market, the universities and teacher education in England, in *Teacher Education in Crisis: The State, the Market and the Universities in England*. Ellis, V. (ed), 1st edn. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Flanagan, R. (2020). Teachers’ personal worldviews and RE in England: A way forward? *British Journal of Religious Education*, 43(3), 320–336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2020.1826404>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. Seabury.
- Freire, P. (1974). ‘Conscientisation’, *Cross Currents*, vol. 24, no. 1.
- Freire, P. (1984). Education, liberation and the church. *Religious Education*, 79(4), 524–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408400790405>
- Freire, P. (2002). ‘Challenging the “banking” concept of education’, in Pollard, A. (ed.) *Readings for Reflective Teaching*. Continuum.
- Fricker, M. (2008). Forum: Miranda Fricker’s epistemic injustice. Power and the ethics of knowing. *An International Journal for Theory, History and Foundations of Science*, 23(1), 69–71. <https://doi.org/10.1387/theoria.7>
- Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from freedom*. Holt.
- Gutierrez, D. K., & Correa-Chavez, M. (2006) ‘What to do about Culture?’, *Lifelong Learning in Europe*, vol. 11, no.3

- Hannam, P., & Biesta, G. (2019). Religious education, a matter of understanding? Reflections on the final report of the Commission on Religious Education. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 40(1), 55–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2018.1554330>
- Hannam, P., Biesta, G., Whittle, S., & Aldridge, D. (2020). Religious literacy: A way forward for religious education? *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 41(2), 214–226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2020.1736969>
- Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700280>
- Jackson, R., & Everington, J. (2016). Teaching inclusive religious education impartially: An English perspective. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 39(1), 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2016.1165184>
- Jackson, R. (2004). *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality, Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy*. Routledge Falmer.
- Jarvis, J. (2021). Empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying for decolonisation: An emancipatory teaching-learning strategy for religion education. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 43(1), 68–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2020.1831439>
- Keddie, A., Wilkinson, J., Howie, L., & Walsh, L. (2019). ‘...We don’t bring religion into school’: Issues of religious inclusion and social cohesion. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 46(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-018-0289-4>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2004). ‘It’s Not the Culture of Poverty it’s the Poverty of Culture: The Problem with Teacher Education’, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*; Washington
- Leganger-Krogstad, H. (2003). ‘Dialogue among young citizens in a pluralistic religious education classroom’, in Jackson, R. (ed), *International Perspectives on Citizenship, Education and Religious Diversity*. Routledge Falmer.
- Lenette, C. (2022). ‘What Is Participatory Action Research? Contemporary Methodological Considerations’, *Participatory Action Research: Ethics and Decolonization*. Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197512456.003.0001>
- Macfarlane, B. (2009). *Researching with integrity: The ethics of academic enquiry*. Routledge.
- Mayo, P. (2022). Understanding colonialism and fostering a decolonizing emancipatory education through Paulo Freire. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 54(13), 2275–2285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2022.2116313>
- Miller, J. (2020). ‘Reflections on the Seminar on Religion and Education: The Forgotten Dimensions of Religious Education’ in Biesta G., & Hannam, P. (eds), *Religion and Education*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004446397>
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849209543534>
- Ofsted (2024). *Deep and Meaningful: The religious education subject report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education/deep-and-meaningful-the-religious-education-subject-report>
- Ofsted (2021). *Research Review Series: Religious education*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education>
- Pett, S. (2024). *Developing a Religion and Worldviews Approach to Religious Education in England, A Handbook for curriculum writers*. <https://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/rec/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/24-25698-REC-Handbook-A4-DIGITAL-PAGES.pdf>
- Picower, B. (2013). You can’t change what you don’t see: Developing new teachers’ political understanding of education. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 11(3), 170–189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344613502395>
- Pine, G.J. (2009). *Teacher action research: Building knowledge democracies*. 1st edn. SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452275079>
- Revell, L. (2005). Student primary teachers and their experience of religious education in schools. *British Journal of RE*, 27(3), 215–226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200500141231>
- Rix, J., & Paige-Smith, A. (2011). Exploring barriers to reflection and learning - Developing a perspective lens. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 11(1), 30–41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-3802.2010.01185.x>
- Salami, M. (2023). *Sensuous knowledge: A Black feminist approach for everyone*. Zed Books.
- Stones, A., & Fraser-Pearce, J. (2022). Is there a place for Bildung in preparing Religious Education teachers to support and promote epistemic justice in their classrooms? *Journal of Religious Education*, 70(3), 367–382. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-022-00187-5>

- Stutchbury, K., & Fox, A. (2009). Ethics in educational research: Introducing a methodological tool for effective ethical analysis. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 39(4), 489–504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640903354396>
- Tisdell, E., & Tolliver, D. (2009). 'Transformative Approaches to Culturally Responsive Teaching' in eds. Mezirow, J., & Taylor E. (eds). *Transformative Learning in Practice, Insights from Community, Workplace and Higher Education*. Jo Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Turvey, K. (2024). 'England's essentialist teacher education policy frameworks as double texts,' in Ellis, V (ed), *Teacher Education in Crisis: The State, the Market and the Universities in England*. 1st edn. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Turvey, K., Ellis, V., Watson, A., Slocombe, M., Kutnick, P., Cowley, S., Harrison, C., & Frederick, K. (2019). *Total Recall? The ITE content framework, research and teachers' understandings of learning*. British Educational Research Association. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/total-recall-the-ite-content-framework-research-and-teachers-understandings-of-learning>
- Wegerif, R. (2010). *Mind expanding: Teaching for thinking and creativity in primary education*. Open University Press.
- Whitworth, L. (2020). Do I know enough to teach RE? Responding to the commission on religious education's recommendation for primary initial teacher education. *Journal of Religious Education*, 68, 345–357. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-020-00115-5>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.