I and Thou? Challenges to dialogical pedagogy in a diverse London secondary school

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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I and Thou? Challenges to dialogical pedagogy in a diverse London secondary school

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Abstract

A growing body of literature suggests that 'intercultural education' is an important tool for transformative learning about oneself and the other. Yet little is known about the challenges and opportunities of intercultural education in practice, particularly in light of an increasing focus in Western education policy on testing and standardisation. This article uses ethnographic and focus group research in an ethnically diverse secondary school in East London to empirically explore the opportunities and challenges of intercultural education in practice. It highlights similarities between the concept of intercultural education and Martin Buber's theory of the 'I–Thou' encounter, suggesting that this dialogical relation has the potential to transform stereotypes and develop personhood. The research findings show how teachers at the East London secondary school employed dialogical techniques to encourage critical perspectives among their students and to cultivate their trust, a key element of I–Thou encounter. The findings also, however, draw attention to the deleterious impact of the marketised education paradigm on the dialogical relation, demonstrating how a policy focus on attainment and the narrow national curriculum limit opportunities for dialogue in the classroom and erode trust between teacher and student. The article argues that there is a clear and urgent imperative for change within the Western education system if Buber's dialogical pedagogy is to bear fruit and transformative learning is to take place.

KEYWORDS

Buber, dialogue, diversity, intercultural education

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

Although intercultural education is key to transformative learning, we know very little about its challenges and opportunities in practice. Drawing on ethnographic and focus group research in a diverse secondary school in East London, the article addresses this gap in knowledge. Buber's theory of dialogical pedagogy provides a generative conceptual framework.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The research found that teachers draw on dialogical techniques to encourage critical perspectives among their students and to build relation. At the same time, opportunities for dialogue in the classroom are strongly limited by a marketised education logic, which erodes trust between teacher and student.

INTRODUCTION

In the first half of the twentieth century, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber argued that human life is marked by two distinct forms of social relation: the objectifying 'I–It' relation, and the 'I–Thou' encounter. The I–It relation involves order, measurement and comparison; 'things and events bounded by other things and events, measured by them, comparable with them' (Buber, 1937, p. 31). In contrast, the I–Thou relation is a dialogical encounter between equal subjects: 'I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*' (Buber, 1937, p. 11). Buber (1937) is clear that the I–Thou relation cannot be engineered, noting that the 'relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*'. Indeed, 'the [wo]man who straightforwardly hates is nearer to relation than the [wo]man without hate and love' (Buber, 1937, p. 16). In contrast to the stability and normativity of the I–It relation, 'the moments of the *Thou* appear as strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-tried context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security' (Buber, 1937, p. 34). The I–Thou involves vulnerability and uncertainty, but also the promise of transformation. It allows us to approach our social differences from a critical perspective—to 'look beyond the external accidents' and to 'discern these inner qualities that make all [wo]men human' (King, 1963, p. 29). Without the I–Thou, 'there can be only the objectification of the *Other* (*I–It* relations), which can lead to prejudices such as racism to take a foothold' (Morgan & Guilherme, 2013, p. 144). Yet Buber (1937, p. 40) also emphasises that the order and form of the I–It relation are necessary—and inevitable—counterparts to the chaos and spontaneity of the I–Thou: 'Every response binds up the *Thou* in the world of *It*. That is the melancholy of man, and his greatness. For that is how knowledge comes about, a work is achieved, and image and symbol made, in the midst of living things'. Buber's ideal, then, is a 'fruitful and necessary' (Friedman, 1947, p. xiii) alternation between the I–It and I–Thou relation.

Social transformation and change through the I–Thou relation are, for Buber (1947, p. 123), the hallmark of education: 'Education worthy of the name is essentially the education of character'. Buber's theory of dialogical education comprises both the instruction of conventional curriculum elements (the I–It) and the 'directness' of relation (the I–Thou) between

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teacher and student (Buber, 1937, p. 125). In the contemporary context of globalisation, educational theorists have built on theories of dialogical pedagogy to argue for the importance of 'intercultural' education (Banks, 2013; Biesta, 2006; Gay, 2002, 2013). Intercultural education involves dialogical learning from difference(s) and otherness. Biesta (2006, p. 9), for instance, posits that education must provide opportunities 'for the "coming into the world" of unique, singular beings, and a responsibility for the world as a world of plurality and difference'. Academic support for intercultural education in Western settings has been mirrored by a trend in European education towards teaching intercultural competences and skills (Banks & Banks, 2009; Barrett, 2013; Stokke & Lybæk, 2018). The importance of an intercultural approach has also been recognised in British educational policy. The British inspectorate of education, Ofsted (2022), suggests that in schools rated as 'Good', pupils should 'engage with views, beliefs and opinions that are different from their own', 'know how to discuss and debate issues', and 'understand, appreciate and respect differences in the world and its people'. In recent decades, however, there has also been a shift in the British, Australian, and American education systems towards 'an economically influenced model of schooling marked by standardisation of education outcomes' (McIntyre & Hall, 2018, p. 4). Van Manen (2016, p. 110) asserts that it is 'difficult nowadays to think of teaching and learning without immediately being concerned with effectiveness, efficiencies, outcomes and the instrumentalities, methods, and technologies of the curriculum'. Similarly, d'Ancona (2021, p. 159) observes that the focus of Western education policy is now on 'standardised testing, league tables and grades as (by far) the most important facets of school life'. Performance-related pay for teachers in Britain was introduced in 2013. Ofsted and attainment targets are now reported as the two key operational priorities for secondary schools (Yeo & Graham, 2015).

In spite of these significant changes in Western education policy, there has been a lack of empirical research on dialogical pedagogy in particular schools, 'with consideration for their particular principles and challenges' (Wolbert & Schinkel, 2021, p. 441). We still know very little about how dialogical or 'intercultural' education works within the marketised education paradigm. The following article responds to this gap in the literature by exploring the challenges and opportunities of dialogical teaching practices based on ethnographic and focus group research in a large, ethnically diverse secondary school in inner-city East London, 'Bradbrook School'.[1] The article takes its cue from Buber's insistence on the importance of the 'I–Thou' relation in education: it begins with an overview of Buber's theory and implications for dialogical pedagogy and intercultural education. It then briefly outlines the research methodology before turning to the findings, examining the challenges and opportunities of dialogical teaching practices at Bradbrook School. The article closes by suggesting implications for future research and education policy.

The education of character

According to Buber (1947, p. 123), the teacher's concern must always be for the student as an equal subject or 'as a whole, both in the actuality in which he lives before you now and in his possibilities, what he can become'. The teacher must be equally present in the relation: 'For educating characters you do not need a moral genius, but you do need a [teacher] who is wholly alive and able to communicate [themselves] directly to [their] fellow beings' (Buber, 1937, p. 124). Friedman (1947, p. xviii) notes that in Buber's concept, 'education of character takes place through the encounter with the image of man that the teacher brings before the pupil in the material he presents and in the way he stands behind this material'. Schinkel (2020, p. 485) also suggests that, for Buber, the educator is 'not herself without substance: rather, *among* the experiences the educator "selects" for the pupil are inevitably

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experiences involving the educator as exemplar'. Teacher and student stand together as equal subjects in the common situation of 'educating' and 'being educated' (Buber, 1947, p. 119). In Buber's (1937, p. 118) view, the teacher must experience their own actions 'ever anew from the other side [of the student]'. Yet Buber (1937, p. 119) also points out that there is a specific asymmetry to the relationship between teacher and student:

> [The educator] experiences the pupil's being educated, but the pupil cannot experience the educating of the educator. The educator stands at both ends of the common situation, the pupil only at one end. In the moment when the pupil is able to throw himself across and experience from over there, the educative relation would be burst asunder, or change into friendship.

Reflecting on this asymmetry, Noddings (2013, p. 95) observes that although the partners in the teacher–student dialogue are equal in the sense that each recognises each other as a human being, 'there is also a structural situation to be considered'—a 'power difference exists'. In other words, 'However equal they are as persons, teacher and student are not equal in the teacher–student relation; they cannot exchange positions regularly' (Noddings, 2013, pp. 95–96). Noddings (2013, p. 95) proposes that consequently, teachers should 'recognize the difference and use their power generously, with some humility', treating their students 'as fellow human beings, not as objects'. The relative fixity of the roles of 'teacher' and 'student' points to the significance of wider educational structures and spaces in generating (or precluding) possibilities for I−Thou encounter. A broad literature has highlighted the pedagogical importance of consistency and predictability in the classroom (Anderson et al., 1988; Stern, 2013; Tomlinson & Murphy, 2015; Wong et al., 2012). For Buber (1947), the 'I−It' language of instruction, the framework of the curriculum, and the defined roles of the teacher and student are all important and necessary. Yet Buber (1947, p. 241) also emphasises that, crucially, these components of education must maintain some flexibility, positing that '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'. As Wilson (2017, p. 612) argues, if we are to take 'the unknowability of encounter seriously, for encounters to happen something has to be left open'.

Buber's concept of dialogue resonates with contemporary work on the role of 'wonder' in education (Piersol, 2013; Schinkel, 2020; Wolbert & Schinkel, 2021). Schinkel (2020, p. 487) notes 'considerable similarities' between the presence and alterity of the I−Thou relation and the concept of contemplative 'wonder' at the 'otherness' of the other; wonder is educationally important because it 'defamiliarises' the world and helps us to see it anew (Schinkel, 2020). Buber's educational theory also has strong parallels with the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970) and hooks (1994). Freire (1970, p. 81) describes dialogical learning as deeply relational and collaborative, as students become 'critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher'. Freire (1970, p. 51) emphasises the intersubjective and humanising nature of the teacher–student relation, noting that, in dialogical education, the teacher and the student are 'both Subjects' (Freire, 1970, p. 51); 'apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human' (Freire, 1970, p. 72). Freire (1970, p. 81) argues that the 'role of the problem-posing educator is to create, together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of the *doxa* [belief] is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of the *logos*'. According to Freire (1970), dialogue involves the development of a critical consciousness about students' roles 'in the world and with the world'. Like Freire, hooks (1994) defines education as 'the practice of freedom'. hooks (1994, p. 12) sees the classroom as a radical and political 'space of possibility' in which teaching can enable 'transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries'. hooks (1994, p. 21) also foregrounds the teacher's presence or 'vulnerability' in the pedagogical relation.

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Similarly, Wolbert and Schinkel (2021, p. 447) assert that in order to stimulate 'wonder' in young people, the teacher must be capable of wonder herself, an experience which involves doubt and vulnerability: 'proper education requires putting oneself on the line'.

In Western settings of migration and diversity, research on the inclusion of young migrants and refugees at school has emphasised the importance of an overarching ethos which promotes respect for sociocultural differences (Bartlett et al., 2017; Borsch et al., 2020; McMullen et al., 2020; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Reflecting on the specific consequences of transnational migration for processes of learning about oneself and the other, Morrice (2018, p. 660) suggests that it is the role of the educator to 'bring together strangers in a common activity which disrupts fixed cultural assumptions and identities'. Dialogical education also involves recognition that 'learning always involves the risk of change in unforeseeable and unwelcome ways' (Morrice, 2018). Morrice (2018) adds that educators in transnational contexts must recognise the significance of multiple experiences in identity formation, including those based on gender, class, education and age. Similarly, Amery et al. (2022) note that intercultural education means encouraging acceptance and openness towards people who are different in terms of not only ethnicity or nationality, but also race, religion, language and socioeconomic status. However, Skrefsrud (2022, p. 230) has pointed to the challenges for educators in Western contexts of recognising cultural differences 'without reducing the other to a representative of a predefined understanding of a cultural community'. Skrefsrud (2022) posits that Buber's relational theory offers a useful framework for understanding the necessary alternation between, on the one hand, recognising young people's cultural differences, and on the other, respecting their unique (and inherently 'unknowable') personhood; the I–Thou relation has 'an integrating function towards the whole' (Skrefsrud, 2022, p. 240). This article proceeds from that basis.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on data from focus groups, semi-structured interviews and participant observation at Bradbrook School and in the local borough from 2019 to 2020. Bradbrook was one of the participating schools in an EU-funded project which aimed to further evidence on the effectiveness of school-based interventions for refugee wellbeing in six European countries. Questionnaires and focus groups were conducted with adolescents and teachers prior to and following the interventions. The 'baseline' questionnaires and focus groups were used to assess young people's wellbeing and to evaluate the influence of contextual factors such as school and family. The 'endline' questionnaires and focus groups evaluated the effectiveness of the interventions in promoting young people's wellbeing, including the impact on resilience, mental health problems and levels of social support. My role on the project involved organising the interventions in the two participating secondary schools in the UK, and planning and conducting the questionnaires and focus groups. This article draws on the data from the focus groups with students and teachers at Bradbrook School; the challenges and opportunities of dialogical teaching practices unexpectedly emerged as strong themes during these focus groups. At Bradbrook, I conducted six student focus groups and one teacher focus group. Each focus group had between five and eight participants.

To analyse the focus group data from each country, the project team developed a shared coding tree, which aimed to understand psychosocial care needs and contextualise them from the baseline focus group data, and to identify cross-intervention and intervention-specific outcomes, working mechanisms and context variables. Each country team then used NVivo, a type of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to code their focus group data in line with the shared coding scheme. The advantages and drawbacks of using computer-assisted (vs. manual) analytical approaches have been discussed in the literature

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(Basit, 2003; García-Horta & Guerra-Ramos, 2009; Mangabeira et al., 2004; Richards & Richards, 1994). Maher et al. (2018) observe that in using qualitative data analysis software, there is a risk of decontextualising and fragmenting a wider view of the data. They suggest that software packages like NVivo cannot 'fully scaffold' the analysis process and recommend that digital coding be combined with manual analysis (Maher et al., 2018, p. 12). For the purposes of this article I chose to combine the NVivo coding with manual coding of the focus group transcripts, highlighting themes of relevance to the topic of dialogical teaching practices using Braun and Clarke's (2006) 'thematic' analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a highly iterative process that involves reading and re-reading data, coding, generating initial themes and review. I returned to the data many times to consolidate the themes.

In addition to the focus group data, this article draws on fieldnotes from participant observation at Bradbrook School, and semi-structured interviews with students, teachers and local community workers. Organising the implementation and evaluation of the EU-funded project in UK schools provided rich ethnographic insights. At Bradbrook I had the opportunity to observe young people's peer relationships in the school's corridors, playgrounds and classrooms over the course of a year. Walking around the classroom during group activities allowed me to take a position of 'unobtrusive observation' (Jabeen, 2009, p. 412). However, I found that passive observation seemed to make some teachers uncomfortable—understandable in the managerial climate and 'audit culture' of contemporary Western education (Guilherme & Morgan, 2016, p. 138). I therefore tried to take an active role where possible, such as supporting students with their reading during 'Accelerated Reading' sessions in the library. This helped me to develop rapport with students and to make teachers feel more at ease. I began to conduct semi-structured interviews after completing several months of observation at Bradbrook; the initial period of observation helped to give me a sense of what was meaningful to participants. I developed a semi-structured interview guide which I used as a jumping-off point to ask young people and adults about social life in the school and local community. At Bradbrook, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 students, eight teachers and three other members of school staff. I also conducted six interviews with members of staff at local community organisations, including youth and community centres, in the East London borough.

Analytical interpretation of the ethnographic research findings was an ongoing, iterative process. During the fieldwork I would often use the 'Notes' app on my phone to record my thoughts about the findings, or to make connections between the literature I was reading at the time and the things I was seeing and hearing at Bradbrook. This helped to expose 'theory to ethnography and ethnography to theory' (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001, p. 15). I would often ask students or teachers for their thoughts on my analysis, recognising that they were the real 'experts on their own worlds' (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010, p. 103). The possibility of more than one interpretation of the 'findings' raises important questions around the 'right' to interpret. Indeed, the research 'findings' themselves are neither neutral nor objective. Said (1978, p. 21) insists that in 'any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation'. In the same way, ethnography cannot avoid 'representational politics' (Neumann, 1996). Writing up research findings involves choosing which words to include, what to edit out, and how to frame those words (Gardner, 2002). As Emerson et al. (1995, p. 19) argue, 'data do not stand alone; rather analysis pervades all phases of the research enterprise'.

Potential interview and focus group participants received information sheets before deciding whether or not to take part in the research. In line with GDPR requirements, parental consent was obtained for students under the age of 13 in addition to their own consent. Information sheets and consent forms were translated into a number of

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different languages, and interpreters were provided during the focus groups and interviews where necessary. Participants were regularly reminded that they could withdraw from the research process at any stage. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sussex. All identifying information was removed from the research analysis—pseudonyms are used for the names of all people and places in this article, and 'R' refers to 'respondent' in the focus group extracts.

Dialogical practices

Bradbrook is an inner-city school in East London with around 750 students. Bradbrook's local borough is characterised by 'superdiversity', a concept which refers to post-war immigration to specific areas of the UK and resulting complexity in relation to places of origin, religious backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, education profiles, legal statuses and other categories (Vertovec, 2007). In 2015, 56% of borough residents had arrived in the area in the last 10 years and 63% had arrived in the last 5 years. Most students at Bradbrook are second- or first-generation immigrants; some were born in the UK to non-British parents, others arrived many years ago and some more recently. The largest religious groups at the school are Muslim and Christian. There are high levels of deprivation in the borough; 50% of children are estimated to live in poverty, compared with 37% in London overall.[2] The majority of Bradbrook students are from low-income households. The borough is highly ethnically diverse, with the lowest percentage of White British people (15%) of all London boroughs (ONS, 2021). This ethnic diversity is reflected in Bradbrook's student population: over 80% of students have English as an Additional Language and students speak a total of more than 58 languages. Similarly, Bradbrook teachers speak a diverse range of languages.[3] Gay (2013) and Schachner et al. (2018) highlight the impact of educators' identities, attitudes and beliefs on intercultural teaching practices. The research findings reveal the situated dimensions of dialogical teaching practices at Bradbrook School as teachers brought their own backgrounds and experiences to the fore in their everyday interactions with students.

Learning from others

Bradbrook students recognised the pedagogical value of exposure to ethnic diversity on an everyday basis. When asked what it was like to go to such an ethnically diverse school, Abshir, an African European student, said, 'I think it's quite nice, to be honest. You've got such a wide array of different people, different colours, different cultures. I mean you want to learn as much as you can from other people's culture. And they also want to learn'. Similarly, Nadir, a Bengali student, noted,

> But for me personally, I love learning about different cultures. I love like, just learning about different countries and religions and things. It's incredibly interesting to get to know someone who's had like a completely different upbringing than me … who has a culture or a faith that's one hundred percent different to mine, because, you know, I think it's just so important to like, listen to each other and understand why … they view the world in the way they do.

Teachers also emphasised the pedagogical benefits of going to an ethnically diverse school. Emily was White British and the school nurse. One of her sons went to the school:

> One of his best friends is Romanian, African … there's all sorts. So yeah, he really, he's learned so much. My kids I think have such a different experience growing up around here. They know so much more about other cultures and religions than … like I grew up in all-white area and you didn't know, you know … you didn't know anything.

She added, ‘I love it around here. In terms of just the diversity, I think it's amazing. We take in so much. You learn from other people, they learn from you’. These experiences all point to an increased understanding of the cultural backgrounds of others through ‘an everyday pedagogy of spontaneous, embodied and unpredictable learning’ (Morrice, 2018, p. 649). Mohamed, a student who had come to the UK from Somalia in 2012, felt that going to school with other students from diverse cultural backgrounds helped to disrupt stereotypes:

> I think if you had studied separately, like brown people here, black people there, white people here, we would all have stereotypes about each other. Now when we're learning together, we break down those stereotypes and we, like, learn about individuality and other stuff, like personality and things like that.

Mohamed's description of learning ‘about individuality and other stuff, like personality and things like that’ suggests the development of a deep form of intercultural understanding that moves beyond Freirean *doxa*—‘belief’—towards *logos* or true ‘knowledge’ of the other (Freire, 1970, p. 81). Mohamed points to his lived experience of ‘breaking down stereotypes’ through ‘learning together’, evoking Amin's (2002, p. 970) argument that ‘engagement with strangers in a common activity disrupts easy labelling of the stranger as enemy and initiates new attachments’. In this instance, the act of ‘learning together’ provides a crucial common purpose. Bradbrook teachers also suggested that intercultural education was academically important. One teacher, Yonas, noted that the everyday process of learning from the cultural differences of others ‘definitely plays a big part in students actually making progress’. This viewpoint echoes the findings of recent research which finds a positive correlation between social and emotional skills (SES) and academic attainment (Brooks, 2014; Durlak et al., 2011). Yet Yonas also pointed out that the school lacked a formalised ‘intercultural’ ethos:

> You gather a whole bunch of students, different cultures, and say, ‘You're all humans’—[laughs] really, I don't want to be philosophical too much, but- ‘You are. But, different colours, different religion, different culture, and you're willing to get on, support each other, and be the best you can and get the best grade, and support each other really.’ And we don't have that.

Yonas attributed the school's lack of an intercultural ethos to the challenges of measuring intercultural skills, pointing out that intercultural learning was ‘very hard to put into numbers to justify to Ofsted’. Like Yonas, teachers in Yeo & Graham's (2015, p. 33) research in English schools emphasised the importance of SES for student attainment but also highlighted the challenges of measuring these skills, noting, ‘It's harder to put your finger on SES or demonstrate which bit makes a difference because it's an underpinning ethos, not a classroom opportunity’. Buber (1937, p. 32) points to this ‘unknowability’, characterising the I–Thou relation as ‘unreliable, for it takes on a continually new appearance; you cannot hold it to its word … It cannot be surveyed, and if you wish to make it capable of survey you lose it’. Similarly, Schinkel (2020, p. 481) posits that in the classroom, the concept of ‘wonder’ ‘hints at a fundamental, irresolvable not-knowing’. Yet Yonas' observation that an intercultural ethos could not be easily ‘justified’ to Ofsted (2022) through quantitative outcomes also points to the

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challenges of encouraging dialogical learning within the strongly 'evidence-based' model of education (Wolbert & Schinkel, 2021, p. 440).

Being critical of the world

Bradbrook students rarely left the local area. During a focus group, Bradbrook teachers reflected:

> R2: For a lot of our students, this small bit of town is all they see of the world—not even the bigger picture of East London, let alone the bigger picture of London, let alone the bigger picture of the country. So there's a perception that everything is like this, when actually most of the country is leafy green suburbs and hardly any people living in it, you know? [agreement]

> R1: Yeah, like one time I took the kids on a trip, and we got off at Green Park station, and one of the boys said, 'I didn't know London could be this nice!', and they were like, 'Wowww!'. Because they just don't get out of their immediate area.

A teacher, Karla, described a recent school trip from East into Central London where she had encouraged her students to reflect on their religious identities in the wider societal context: 'When we went on the trip I said, "Oh, that Nando's is most likely not halal". And I had to say to them, "We are actually, as Muslims, a minority. Because here we might be the majority in [the borough], but somewhere else we are actually a minority". So that for them was like "Really …?"'. By aligning herself with her students, Karla helped them to reflect on their positions in and with society (Freire, 1970). Young people's exclamations of 'Really …?' suggest wonder and surprise at Karla's words, capturing the 'defamiliarising' role of wonder in education (Schinkel, 2020, p. 487): Piersol (2013) argues that in inspiring a sense of 'wonder' at the world, teachers can foster a sense of mystery and humility, which both contribute to the development of perspective. Aaron, a local community worker, had taken young people in the borough on similar trips into central London. He described how these trips gave students important life skills and exposed them to other opportunities: 'Some would love to go beyond [the borough]. And some are very, very happy just staying here. But unless you are exposed to those other opportunities, you never know'.

Skrefsrud (2019) draws parallels between the I−Thou encounter and Gadamer's (1975) concept of 'Bildung' to show that encounters with 'otherness' may lead to self-awareness and self-insight as well as new perspectives that extend horizons of interpretation. By taking young people on fieldtrips to other parts of London, adults helped young people in the East London borough to establish a 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 1975, p. 305). Taylor (1994, p. 67) argues that in doing so, 'We learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture'. Yet it has also been emphasised that widening 'vocabularies of comparison' (Taylor, 1994) is not, on its own, enough to facilitate social transformation. Rather, Boostrom (1998, p. 407) highlights the fundamental importance of criticality: 'That we need to hear other voices in order to grow is certainly true, but we also need to be able to respond to those voices, to criticize them, to challenge them, to sharpen our own perspectives through the friction of dialogue'. During a focus group, Bradbrook teachers said that they wanted to encourage criticality among their students on accepted understandings of social issues. According to Kate,

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> I also—educationally, I kind of want them to look at the world and be critical of it, so I don't want them to just accept, 'Well, this is how it is'. I want them to kind of of like be able to say, 'Actually we want a better world than what this is, and that is what education is about'. I don't want them to inherit something that we've left that's awful, and just then, make it worse. Which sounds a bit liberal, but …

Kate, like Buber, expresses 'a sense that the world is out of joint' (Schinkel, 2020, p. 484), and sees an urgent need to address social and political issues through dialogical education. Some Bradbrook teachers drew on their lived experiences to encourage critical discussion with their students. Migration, for instance, was a common topic of conversation. Nadir, a Bengali student, said that his teachers had encouraged him to talk about his experience of moving from Bangladesh to the UK, noting, 'I think because the teachers are so open-minded and because the teachers themselves are so diverse … that makes it a lot easier to open up about things like that'. Other teachers used their lived experiences to challenge migration-related stereotypes. Abdi was from Northeast Africa and had lived in Central Europe before coming to the UK as a teenager. He noted that although many students had backgrounds of migration or displacement, their attitudes were heavily influenced by negative media narratives. He would refer to his own refugee background in informal conversations with students:

> They're not sure of the difference and they think, like, you're cussing them if you say … but I tell them straight, 'I used to be a refugee. There's nothing wrong with being a refugee. You're just like anybody else. Just the circumstances that you're in doesn't mean that I'm lesser than you are or you're better than me'.

In sharing his own experiences, Abdi makes himself vulnerable, eliminating the possibility of acting as an 'all-knowing, silent interrogator' (hooks, 1994, p. 21). Rather, he takes an 'existential risk … in the sense that you put yourself on the line, and the outcome is, in principle, unknowable' (Wolbert et al., 2018, p. 534). It is this 'unknowability' that is part of the humanising power of the I–Thou relation; Abdi's embodied presence in front of his students supersedes 'the It of knowledge which is composed of ideas' (Buber, 1937, p. 41) and 'fulfils the nature of the act of knowledge to be real and effective *between* [wo]men' (Buber, 1937). As Lewis (1961, p. 56) suggests, the face of the other 'incessantly triumphs' over our 'mere idea' of them. Abdi's example illustrates the risks, but also the rewards, of dialogical teaching practices. Yet Bradbrook teachers also felt that the current education system is antithetical to risk-taking in teaching. Shortly before the teacher focus group at Bradbrook there were far-right terrorist attacks at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, and a tram shooting by an Islamic extremist in Utrecht, Holland. Kate reflected,

> We have done nothing about New Zealand—there's been no [period of] silence, no forum for people to talk about it. We've got kids who were ringing family members in Holland yesterday because they got text messages, and their phone was taken off them, for receiving a text message for that …

Kate's description of young people who contacted their 'family members in Holland' is indicative of the widespread use of technology to maintain transnational connections in the context of globalisation (Vertovec, 2004). Although global issues such as extremism are of local relevance to young people in 'superdiverse' contexts (Meissner, 2020), Kate highlights a stark absence of educational forums in which to discuss them. She added,

> We treat it as if we're living in a bubble, because I think we're frightened to open up … a can of worms with stuff, because we don't know how we're gonna be

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> able to deal with it. And that's not right, because if you don't let kids talk about what's going on in the world, they'll find somewhere else to talk about it, and I think we need to be more responsive to things that are happening in the world.

Dialogical education, Stern (2013, p. 49) submits, 'is personal and is not simply a search for understanding, but a transformation of character: this can be painful'. Kate's idea of 'living in a bubble', however, implies that comfort and safety—the 'world of It'—are currently being prioritised in education policy over the vulnerability, uncertainty and (potentially painful) emotional exposure necessary for dialogue on global issues. As Boostrom (1998, p. 406) suggests, when 'safe space' in education is understood as 'the avoidance of stress', 'every impulse towards critical reflection' is drained from classroom life. Furthermore, in using the metaphor of being frightened to 'open up a can of worms', Kate highlights a fundamental lack of appetite in education policy for risk. And yet, as Boostrom (1998, p. 407) insists, teachers and students 'have to be brave because along the way we are going to be "vulnerable and exposed"; we are going to encounter images that are "alienating and shocking." We are going to be very unsafe'. Similarly, Kate warns that not to provide a forum for discussion of extremism in the classroom presents the danger that young people will 'find somewhere else to talk about it'; social media platforms have become prime locations for radicalisation content and behaviour among young people (Fernandez et al., 2019). Other Bradbrook teachers drew attention to the restrictive effects of the curriculum on opportunities for dialogue in the classroom about local issues:

> R1: I remember particularly after Grenfell, a lot of the kids really wanted to talk about it.
>
> R2: But we didn't have any forum for kids to talk about it. It was like, lessons go on as normal, the GCSEs go on as normal, the curriculum goes on as normal.

The teachers refer to the fire at Grenfell Tower in West London in 2017, in which 72 people lost their lives. Akala (2018, p. 20) describes the Grenfell Tower tragedy as 'undeniably caused by systematic contempt for the lives of poor people' and 'perhaps the ultimate and most gruesome tribute to austerity yet seen'. The tragedy is a reminder of the significant role of socioeconomic inequality in ethnically diverse settings such as London, supporting the findings of other studies which challenge assumptions about the salience of ethnic or religious differences in these contexts (Bjørnskov, 2008; Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2010; Gesthuizen et al., 2009; Laurence, 2011). The teachers highlight that, as with issues of extremism, young people had a strong desire to talk about the tragedy but were unable to do so because of an absence of a 'forum' for discussion, whether in 'lessons', 'the GCSEs', or 'the curriculum'. The teachers observe that these spaces are strongly lacking in flexibility—instead, they all 'go on as normal'. As Wolbert and Schinkel (2021, p. 440) contend, it is clear that this 'neoliberal' paradigm is 'inhospitable to the interruptions of wonder and doubt and the unpredictability they would bring to education'.

The teacher–student relationship

Shady and Larson (2010, p. 89) posit that in Buber's concept, trust between teacher and student is fundamental to 'making risk-taking and deep learning possible'. A Bradbrook teacher, Hamza, observed that 'when you start teaching a class, you don't truly get to teach them unless you have a relationship with them'. Bradbrook students such as Nadir similarly described a relational view of learning:

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> I would say I learn way better in lessons where I can, you know, open up to the teacher and the teacher is open with me. I have … I've had teachers in the school who are like academically brilliant, like very, very good. But I know I couldn't, like, have a joke with them … they wouldn't be the people I turned to.

Here Nadir draws a parallel between 'being open' and 'having a joke' with his teachers. Bradbrook teachers often drew on humour to address sensitive social issues with their students, as we see in the following fieldnote:

> The class are doing group work. I'm walking around to help where I can. The class teacher, Ana, is speaking to a group of students—the topic of theft has come up in their work, and a discussion has emerged around how it should be dealt with. A Middle Eastern student says that it would be a good idea to chop off someone's hand for stealing. Ana responds, 'So if I stole your pencil right now, would you chop off my hand?'. He laughs in response, 'Come on, Miss …'.

In spontaneously using tongue-in-cheek humour, Ana playfully encourages the student to question his cultural assumptions, improvising, adapting and responding to actual learning as it unfolds in real time (Gattegno, 2014; Wolbert & Schinkel, 2021). Research has found that humour in the classroom can enhance the teacher–student relationship and facilitate a positive social and emotional learning environment (Hackathorn et al., 2011; Kher et al., 1999; Tsukawaki et al., 2020). During an interview, Manu, a British Bengali student, also highlighted the role of humour in the teacher–student relationship: 'Like, if you have like a joke with teachers, and the teachers will take a joke, and you will take a joke, then that's like a good relationship, cos you understand when's the boundaries and you understand what's the joke. That's what makes you a good teacher'. The use of humour helps teachers to downplay the inherent authority in the teaching position and to create 'an atmosphere of participation, sharing, and playful learning' (Buskist et al., 2002, p. 29). Yet Manu also emphasises the importance of a mutual understanding between teacher and student of the boundaries of the 'joking frame' (Wise, 2016, p. 482); he recognises that vulnerability is 'based on mutuality and requires boundaries and trust' (Brown, 2012, p. 45). Indeed, as Buber (1937) and Noddings (2013) assert, the teacher–student relation is always characterised by a 'structural situation' and a 'power difference exists' (Noddings, 2013, p. 95). At the same time, the use of humour facilitates a mutual openness between teacher and student, allowing them to enter into the I−Thou relation. The I−Thou relation 'knows no system of co-ordination' (Buber, 1937, p. 31); rather, the I−It roles of 'teacher' and 'student' can be 'only the background out of which it emerges, not its boundary and measured limit' (Noddings, 2013). Several Bradbrook students complained, however, that the I−It roles of 'teacher' and 'student' had in some cases become wholly constitutive of the teacher–student relation:

> R6: I think us students and teachers have a different perspective of learning, and teachers will say, 'I already said it once and I cannot say it again,' and it's their idea and they think they're doing the right thing, but us students, we think that it's not the right thing. So it's kind of like we're living in two different-
>
> R5: Worlds.
>
> R6: Mindsets, of each other, and we don't go together.

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> R3: I think some teachers, their status of being a teacher, they are taking their power over, you know, like a tyrant. They are abusing their power. The way they do like, 'I'm the teacher, you're the child, listen to me, you have to listen to me, and I'll boss you around'. Even if you ask a question which might even help the teacher themself—'No, I can't hear, go back to your seat, go do your work'—they are abusing their power when they say they are the … and you can't learn from that.

The students describe their teachers as having 'a different perspective of learning'. Their words evoke a relentless focus on attainment and outcomes, capturing a sense of hurry, of being 'bossed around' by their teachers, and of an urgency to 'do their work'. According to the students, teachers and students are 'living in two different worlds' and 'don't go together'. The mutuality of the I−Thou relation has been lost so that 'I'm the teacher, you're the child'—the 'human being … has now become again a He or a She, a sum of qualities, a given quantity with a certain shape' (Buber, 1937, p. 17). Friedman (1947, p. xiii) points to the eventually dehumanising consequences of a life dominated by the I−It relation: 'When the It swells up and blocks the return to the Thou, then man's existence becomes unhealthy, his personal and social life inauthentic'. This is evident in the power dynamics which mark the teacher–student relation: the teacher has become 'a tyrant' in the children's eyes. Education is no longer 'the practice of freedom' but 'the practice of domination' (Freire, 1970, p. 81); in the I−It relation it is 'considered folly to imagine any freedom; there is only a choice; between resolute, and hopeless rebellious, slavery' (Buber, 1937, p. 57). The students demonstrate an inherently Buberian understanding of education as dialogue—a process of mutual learning between teacher and student in which a student's question 'might even help the teacher themself'. As Buber (1937, p. 15) exclaims, 'We are moulded by our pupils and built up by our works … How we are educated by children and by animals!'. Yet the students contrast this ideal with their perception of teachers as 'abusing their power', pointing out, crucially, that 'you can't learn from that'. The lack of learning for both students *and* teachers is at the interpersonal level of *logos*, representing the 'very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human' (Freire, 1970, p. 74). The effect, Freire (1970, p. 77) suggests, is 'necrophilous'—education of 'character' is no more.

CONCLUSIONS: THE 'NOTHINGNESS' OF WESTERN EDUCATION

This article has foregrounded the perspectives of teachers and students, offering insight into embodied experiences of education as a delicate and complex dance between the I−It and I−Thou relation. The research points to the pedagogical benefits of exposure to diversity for both teachers and students, as they engage in everyday processes of informal and spontaneous learning about the 'other'. However, the findings also identify an absence of a formalised intercultural 'ethos'. It is clear that much of what is valuable in secondary education cannot be captured by quantitative data, yet the fundamental importance of measurement within the evidence-based education paradigm is undeniable. This suggests the need for new, qualitative measures which can indicate the material impact of intercultural learning on academic outcomes as well as recognising the ultimate 'unknowability' of the I−Thou relation. Ethnographic research could shed further light on the changing dynamics of the I−It and I−Thou relation at different times and in different places. Such research could support a necessary policy shift towards recognising and embracing the importance of intercultural learning in the formal education sector.

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The research findings underline the pedagogical value of field trips and encounters with 'otherness' for expanding young people's horizons in relation to multiple cultural differences. They reveal the importance of criticality, showing how Bradbrook teachers draw on their lived experiences to challenge stereotypes among students and signal their own vulnerability in doing so. At the same time, teachers lack the space to explore generative themes in their teaching practices. The potential for dialogue on issues of global and local relevance goes unfulfilled. Teachers must be given room to take risks in the classroom; doing so would not mean reinventing the curriculum but rather, leaving it open to surprise, uncertainty, and dormant wonder (Piersol, 2013). The findings demonstrate that wonder can emerge from the quotidian, and that a 'particular *It*, by entering the relational event, *may* become a *Thou*' (Buber, 1937, p. 33). An honest assessment of the (implicit and explicit) ethos, values and aims of the British education system is needed if the curriculum is be made more open to the possibility of teachers and students 'entering the relational event'.

Finally, the research confirms the inherent relationality of 'the education of character'. The findings highlight the significance of humour in the I−Thou teacher–student relation, showing how teachers spontaneously use humour to create an environment of mutual openness, which emerges from the boundaries of the 'teacher' and 'student' roles. In this way, the findings reveal how the I−It and I−Thou relation may co-exist and complement each other in synchronous and fruitful alternation. The students' perspectives, however, expose the extent to which the lifegiving I−Thou relation has been eroded by a 'neoliberal' focus on outcomes and attainment. It is clear from their words that a curriculum stripped of opportunities for dialogue is wholly insufficient for the education of character. Slowing the pace of education to allow possibilities for the I−Thou encounter between teacher and student, and rejecting a marketised logic, is essential if transformative learning is to take place. As Buber (1937, p. 32) warns of the I−It relation, 'Only concerning it may you make yourself "understood" with others … But you cannot meet others in it. You cannot hold on to life without it, its reliability sustains you; but should you die in it, your grave would be in nothingness'.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

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PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

Not applicable.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Pseudonyms are used for the names of all people and places in this article.

[2] Households are considered to be below the UK poverty line if their income is 60% below the median household income after housing costs.

[3] Between them Bradbrook staff spoke many languages, including Zulu, Galician, Yoruba, Wolof, Spanish, Greek, Twi, Hindi, Turkish, Sylheti, Ga, Somali, Bengali, Edo, Serer, Russian, Arabic, Romanian, French Creole, Punjabi, Lithuanian, Hausa, Gujarati, Fanti, Ewe, Croatian, Bulgarian and Amharic.

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