**Exploring dialogic space: A Case Study of a Religious Education Classroom.**

**Abstract**

Dialogic approaches to pedagogy have received increased attention in educational research in the past decades (Authors 2013). Despite the substantial body of research on the quality of classroom talk, the secondary education context still remains less explored (Authors 2014). The aim of the paper is to contribute to our understanding of dialogic practices in this context with a particular focus on: a) the creation of dialogic space (Wegerif 2007); and b) the enactment of dialogic interactions in this space. The paper presents a case study on a Year 13 Religious Education classroom in the South of England, UK. Data are drawn from a videorecorded lesson and audiorecorded teacher interviews. A qualitative analysis of the data revealed the importance of certain factors in creating dialogic space, including teacher instructions, activity type and teacher dialogic strategies. It is argued that being condusive to dialogue, the context of RE can be studied further. With growing evidence coming from this context, pedagogical guidelines can be created for teachers who wish to develop a more dialogic pedagogy.

**Keywords:** Classroom dialogue; Dialogic Space; Secondary Education; Religious Education; Case Study.

**Word count:** 7776

**1. Introduction**

***1.1. Classroom dialogue***

In recent years, the study of classroom talk has become a key topic in educational research due to its links with student learning (Resnick and Asterhan 2015). Interest in the role of talk in learning largely stems from sociocultural theoretical perspectives, which view language as the mediating tool for thinking (e.g. Vygotsky 1962). The strong relationship between speaking and thinking establishes learning as a social activity through which meaning is co-constructed (Littleton and Mercer 2013). Considering the classroom context, knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between classroom participants, namely the teacher and the students.

The work of Robin Alexander (2011) set the foundations for a dialogic approach to teaching. According to this work, classroom talk has to be collective with participants reaching a shared understanding of a task through dialogue, reciprocal with ideas and opinions being shared, supportive meaning that participants’ contributions are being encouraged respected and valued, cumulative with participants being guided towards a direction that extends their understanding and establishes links, and purposeful meaning that talk should be directed towards specific goals. In a dialogic classroom, therefore, students are actively engaged in dialogue. They are expected to be open to new ideas, to respect, to value and to critically engage with ideas, to build on others’ ideas, to justify their opinions and to resolve disagreements (Alexander 2011). Similarly, teachers invite students to consider ideas, to elaborate on them, and to justify their own contributions. These patterns are a contrast to the classic triadic Initiation-Response-Feedback pattern (Mehan, 1979; Lemke, 1990), where teachers ask questions of low cognitive demand for students, students produce short and simple answers, and teachers evaluate those answers based on their correctness (Sedova, Sedlacek and Svaricek 2016). Although not considered to be particularly productive, such triadic patterns are still prevalent in classrooms (Authors 2013).

Others have developed concepts that describe productive types of talk more explicitly. In particular, the work of Mercer and colleagues (e.g. Mercer 1995; Mercer 2000; Mercer and Littleton 2007; Littleton and Mercer 2013) describes three types of classroom talk and in particular in student-student talk: 1) *disputational talk* represents the more competitive kind of interaction which involves disagreements and no attempts for resolution; 2) *cumulative talk* represents accepting each others’ opinions without critically evaluating them; and 3) *exploratory talk* represents contributions that enable reasoning, exploring, asking questions, challenging, building on each others’ ideas, negotiating meaning, and eventually coming to some agreement. While the first two types of talk are encountered more often in students’ interactions, exploratory talk is considered to be ‘the most educationally effective’ (Littleton and Mercer 2013, 16) and represents the principles of dialogic teaching and learning. Similarly, in the US context “accountable talk”(Resnick, Michaels and O’Connor 2010) has been characterised as the most academically productive type of talk. It refers to the speaker being accountable to the learning community by listening to others and engaging with their ideas; being accountable to accepted standards of reasoning by making connections and reaching conclusions; and, developing knowledge based on evidence (e.g. facts, texts). Finally, in the field of psychology “transactive discussions”have been characterised as ‘developmentally effective’ consisting of ‘an interpenetration of reasoning’ by the participants (Berkowitz and Gibbs 1983, 399). Rather than simply using assertions, participants ‘“operate” on each others reasoning’ (Berkowitz and Gibbs 1983, 402). Despite the subtle differences between these types of talk, their common features point to certain forms of dialogue that seem to be productive for learning and developed understanding.

While Alexander (2011) showed a preference for indicators of dialogue, others have attempted to look at it more systematically by devising tools for coding classroom talk. Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser and Long (2003) focused on types of productive questions. Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif and Sams (2004) investigated reasoning words or ‘keys’ that identify their presence. More recently, Hennessy et al. (2016) developed the Scheme for Educational Dialogue Analysis (SEDA) which comprises of 33 codes clustered in 8 main categories: 1) invite elaboration or reasoning (i.e. inviting critical responses to ideas, perspective); 2) make reasoning explicit (through explanation, justification, argumentation, analogy); 3) build on ideas (either in terms of content or the way ideas are expressed); 4) express or invite relevant ideas; 5) positioning and coordination (i.e. taking a position or stance, or coordinate by proposing a resolution or synthesis); 6) reflect on dialogue or activity (i.e. metacognitive reflection); 7) connect (i.e. making explicit links to ideas, positions, arguments); and 8) guide direction of dialogue or activity (i.e. shaping and directing dialogue). Having been tested across a range of educational settings, these categories can characterise the quality of dialogue across lessons, discriminating between more dialogic and less dialogic interactions.

***1.2. Research in secondary education***

Most research on dialogic teaching has been conducted in primary education. A few studies, however, examine the secondary context. Ruthven et al (2017) observed dialogue in science and mathematics classrooms in secondary English schools, as part of an intervention study which involved teacher professional development in dialogic teaching. During the observations, they determined the frequency of certain markers of dialogue. These included the number of students involved, teachers asking for explanations and feedback, and pupils giving reasons. In a teacher development context, Sedlacek and Sedova (2017) followed the dialogic teaching practice of eight Czech teachers in lower secondary schools. They analysed videorecorded lessons from these teachers over the course of year and found that students increased their participation and the complexity of their talk. Dialogue in the secondary school context is still relatively unexplored.

Exploring the reasons behind the prevalence of research in primary education, Authors (2014) reported that the wholistic approach adopted in primary education was more conducive to dialogic pedagogy. Teachers have more regular contact with the same group of students during the year and so establishing a specific pedagogical approach is possible. Secondary school teachers spend less time with each group of students, during which they adopt a strong subject-specific focus with a lesser concern about their pedagogical technique (Authors 2014). Nevertheless, the six experts interviewed in the work of Authors (2014) made a strong case for researching and promoting dialogic teaching in secondary education. They all pointed to unique affordances for dialogue in the secondary education context. Specifically, Neil Mercer stated that the greater cognitive ability of secondary level students and the increasing knowledge of specialist language and concepts can lead to dialogue of greater sophistication. Similarly, Rupert Wegerif argued that the discourses of the subject disciplines enable students to enter into dialogue, thus creating ‘an internal dialogic space comprising of competing perspectives’ (Authors 2014, 94). Such activities lead to ‘greater interdependence, authority and engagement as the topics take on greater personal meaning’ (Authors 2014, 94).

***1.3. Dialogic Space in Religious Education***

Considering the relationship between the subject of RE and dialogic pedagogy, the notion of *dialogic space* (Wegerif 2007) becomes particularly important. In RE, religions are not portrayed as opposing competitive entities, but rather as a space to challenge and understand the truths of each religion (Religious Education Council, 2013). The subject of RE is increasingly constructed on a space where people from different backgrounds and with different interpretations engage in dialogue about ethical and philosophical questions which concern everyone (Moate 2011). Ethical questions concern ideas about justice and fairness, environmental ethics, prejudice and war (Religious Education Council, 2013). Philosophical questions concern the meaning of human life, its origin and purpose, what happiness is, or human life ‘in relation to the development of new medical technologies’ (Religious Education Council, 2013; 24). Students, therefore, should develop the ability to listen and understand others’ opinions on these questions and then form their own informed opinion.

The notion of dialogic space offers a suitable framework for the contemporary teaching practice of RE. The term “dialogic space” was initially used to describe how dialogue differed between successful and less successful groupwork (Wegerif 2007). As the interaction between students of successful groups was characterised by more listening, questioning and altering opinions (Wegerif 2011), the term referred to a space that allowed for more than one perspectives to be shared and led to a more ‘dynamic continuous emergence of meaning’ (Wegerif 2011, 180). In other words, the notion of ‘space’ refers to ‘a social realm of activity’ where participants have the opportunity to ‘think and act collectively’ (Mercer, Warwick, Kershner and Staarman 2010, 368). It is not about competing views, but about the *blend* of different views to a single shared common understanding. Steming from Bakhtinian conceptualisations (Bakhtin 1981), the notion of dialogic space has been used in numerous studies as a framework to exlain how meaning and understanding is co-constructed through dialogue (Authors 2014). Examples include studies on the collaborative use of computer-based technology (e.g. Wegerif and Dawes 2004), and studies that examined the role of interactive-whiteboards in providing a ‘dialogic space’ (Mercer et al. 2010). Authors (2019) examined the dialogic actions developed in material-dialogic space, as these were taking place in a micro-blogging tool. Similarly, Helm (2013) used dialogic space to examine dialogues in groups on sensitive topics.

***1.4. Research Focus***

To address the issues raised in this paper, the following research questions are investigated:

1. What factors contribute to the creation of dialogic space within the pedagogy of secondary RE classrooms?
2. What dialogic practices are seen taking place within the dialogic space in RE secondary classrooms?

This investigation makes an important contribution to the literature because it explores how the nature of the RE subject is thought to be conducive to dialogic teaching due to its openness to authentic and respectful dialogue (Luby 2014). The context of RE is considered to be unique for two reasons: a) it is relatively unexplored; and b) it is expected that the language used in this context would be intrinsically linked to theories of productive classroom talk because RE is about respecting and valuing others views. Dialogue, therefore, could be a core mechanism in such classroom interactions. The uniqueness of the RE context offered grounds for deep exploration into classroom dialogue that could contribute to theory.

Furthermore, this investigation responds to the lack of research in the context of secondary education, as described in section 1.2, as well as the lack of research on social sciences subjects (Authors 2013). The vast majority of research on dialogic teaching follows lessons in the hard sciences subjects, such as mathematics (e.g. Franke, Webb and Chan 2009) and science (e.g., Mercer, Dawes and Kleine-Staarman 2009). Given the strong conceptual links between dialogic instruction and the teaching of subjects, like Religious Education, it is imperative that research is conducted in the context of social sciences. This paper aims to provide initial insights into this matter.

**2. Methodology**

***2.1. The XXXXX Project***

The current case study examination forms part of a larger research project, called the “XXXXX project”,based at the XXXXX (http://www.XXXXX/). The overall aim of this phase of the project was to explore the role of dialogic teaching and learning in secondary education. As part of the project, an online Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme, which was largely based on Alexander’s principles of dialogic teaching, was developed. This nationally available CPD course was a blended learning programme which consisted of e-portfolio development, online course materials and discussion, and occasional conferences (more details in Authors 2014).

Teachers participating in this phase of the project had previously completed the XXXXX CPD course and were, therefore, familiar with dialogic pedagogy. These were secondary school teachers of various subjects, including mathematics, English, RE and geography. For this phase of the project, teachers were asked to prepare a dialogic lesson that would be video-recorded by the project team. In addition, teachers participated in semi-structured interviews before and after their lessons. The pre-lesson interview aimed to elicit information about the teachers’ participation in the XXXXX CPD course, their views on dialogic teaching strategies, their views on dialogue in different subjects and student experience, and finally their expectations of the upcoming lesson. The post-lesson interview aimed to create a comparative picture between what the teachers expected to happen and what actually happened in the lessons. Data from each teacher were treated as case studies and are presented in separate papers.

***2.2. Participant(s)***

The present study focuses on one teacher of RE and his classroom of six Year 13 (aged 17-18) A level students (one male, five female students). The teacher, David[[1]](#footnote-1), was the head of department at a highly achieving school in the south of England at the time of the research. He had completed the XXXXX CPD course a year prior to our study. He had links with our university since he was involved with RE teaching in the initial teacher education programme. His experience of teaching RE in classrooms, training RE teachers and his interest in dialogic teaching made him suitable for the present study, as he would have been able to reflect on the relationship between dialogic pedagogy and the RE subject.

***2.3. Data***

Data derive from two sources: 1) one videorecorded RE lesson, and 2) two interviews with the teacher, one taking place before the lesson and one after the lesson. Consent was sought for the use of this data.

Having agreed on a date to visit the class for the videorecording, David was told to conduct his lesson as he would normally do; the lesson, therefore, was random. Two videocameras were placed at two different corners of the room in order to capture different angles of the lesson. Two audiorecorders were placed on the table, where the students and the teacher were sitting. In addition, the teacher was asked to wear a radio microphone which was attached to one of the cameras.

The topic of the lesson was environmental ethics. In preparation for the lesson, the students had read the text “Respect for Life: Counting what Singer finds of no account” written by Holmes Rolston (1999). The text was a critique of the philosopher’s Peter Singer (1993) stance on environmental ethics. During the lesson, the students had to discuss the extent to which Singer and Rolston would agree with 12 Talking Points. Talking Points are an activity that involves ‘a list of statements which may be factually accurate, contentious or downrights wrong’ (Mercer, Dawes and Kleine Staarman 2009, 363). The aim is to encourage ‘thoughtful discussion, analysis and reasoning’ (Dawes 2012, 1). As this data was not collected at the time of the recording, the appendix shows six out of the 12 Talking Points that were given to the students; these six points were the ones that students had the time to discuss during this lesson and so they emerged from the video data.

The interviews with the teacher were semi-structured. The pre-lesson interview concerned strategies that the teacher used in order to facilitate dialogic teaching, suitability of dialogue use in RE teaching, and expectations about the upcoming lesson. The post-lesson interview aimed to create a comparative picture between lesson expectations and what actually happened in terms of the level of dialogue used, strategies used, and students’ use of dialogue. Probing questions were used in both interviews to help deepen the conversation.

***2.4. Data Analysis***

Both types of data were analysed qualitatively.

*2.4.1. Analysis of videorecorded classroom dialogue*

As explained in Section 1.4., the context of this investigation was considered to be unique. For this reason, a deductive approach to the analysis that would involve the application of coding categories from existing tools (such as SEDA) was deemed unsuited for our purposes, as it could have restricted our findings. As Mercer (2004) puts it, ‘reduc[ing] the data of conversation to a categorical tally […] could not maintain the crucial involvement with the contextualised, dynamic nature of talk’ (146). Instead, an inductive approach was deemed more suited, as it would allow for possible particularities from this context to emerge. Specifically, an “open coding” approach, or as Charmaz (2006) names it an “initial coding” approach, was used. The aim of this approach is ‘to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by your readings of the data’ (Charmaz 2006, 46), while following ‘some recommended general guidelines’ (Saldaña 2013, 100). In the cases of the present study, the guidelines referred to by Saldaña (2013) consist of the features of productive dialogue already discussed in the literature. It is important to note that although this approach includes the word ‘coding’, we did not use coding in its strict sense, namely developing a coding scheme bottom-up and applying the codes to the data. Our aim was to provide a characterisation of the data and specifically characterise each turn of the interaction in order to understand the whole in a deeper sense.

Using this overall approach, a “Socio-cultural Discourse Analysis” (SCDA) typology (Mercer 2004) was used. This methodology ‘focuses on the use of language as a social mode of thinking’ (Mercer 2004, 137). In particular, it studies language as a tool for ‘constructing knowledge, creating joint understanding and tackling problems collaboratively’ (Mercer 2004: 137). It captures, therefore, the way a group ‘interthinks’ (Mercer 2000) when interacting. People in groups do not just talk to each other; they ‘use language to combine their intellectual resources in the pursuit of a common task’ (Mercer 2004, 139). SCDA, therefore, differs from linguistic discourse analysis in that it is ‘less focused on language itself and more on its functions for the pursuit of joint intellectual activity’ (Mercer 2004, 141).

Our own open coding analysis, therefore, focused on the function (as referred to in SCDA) that each speaker turn[[2]](#footnote-3) had; in other words, the effect of each turn on the trajectory of dialogue. It is worth distinguishing here between features that support the creation of a dialogic environment and contributions that steer dialogue towards a shared learning experience. Analysing teacher-teacher dialogues, Authors (2016) call the former *supportive moves* and the latter *dialogic moves.* Supportive moves are ‘interactional cues […] which could be found in either physically (e.g. nodding) or verbally (e.g. minimal responses)’ (Authors 2016, 562). The functional analysis discussed here, therefore, would focus on dialogic moves because these are the ones that have a function in terms of taking the joint thinking forward. Supportive moves will be discussed in the findings, but not as part of the functional analysis. While we do not follow a specific coding scheme, features of exploratory talk, as described in Section 1.1., offered a useful ‘frame for reference’ (Mercer 2004, 146). Those included critical engagement with ideas (e.g. challenging), building on each others’ ideas, justifying ideas and reaching agreement (Mercer 2000).

The videorecorded classroom dialogue data were fully transcribed. The members of our research team (the authors of this paper) independently studied the material (i.e. watched the video while reading the transcript) and then had qualitative discussions around emerging features that seemed to contribute to the creation of a dialogic environment and interaction. During these meetings, part of the lesson was perused for the possible functions of each turn and the group agreed on a single function that would characterise each turn. Having agreed on the the functions of this part of the lesson, the leading author went through the rest of the lesson and assigned functions to the remaining turns. Cases of uncertainty were taken to the team and agreed upon.

*2.4.2. Analysis of interview data*

A qualitative content analysis approach was adopted for the analysis of the interview data. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) put it, this approach ‘focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text’ (1278). Our aim in the present study was to describe the dialogic practices taking place in the context of RE teaching, so the interview data were intended to complement our observations of the teacher’s pedagogical choices. In other words, we expected that to some extent the interview data would help interpret the observational data. To conduct the analysis, we immersed ourselves in the data to allow for new insights to emerge. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) argued, data collected through interviews that involve open-ended and probing questions generate information specific to the participants’ comments, rather than related to a pre-existing theory.

The interview data were also fully transcribed. The analytic focus here was on topics relevant to the research questions, meaning the nature of talk in RE teaching, the role of students and the teacher, and dialogic space in RE teaching. In addition, the focus was on comments that could potentially help explain some of the phenomena observed in the video data. In order to get a sense of the whole, members of the research team immersed themselves to the data through repeated reading of the transcripts and listening to the audio-recordings. Having examined this data, the research team held qualitative discussions on the potential meaning of emerging ideas, as well as how they could help interpret the observational data.

**3. Findings**

The qualitative analysis of the data shed light on very interesting issues that relate to the development of dialogic space and the dialogic practices that take place within it. This section presents the findings around the two research questions.

***3.1. Response to RQ1 “What factors contribute to the creation of dialogic space within the pedagogy of secondary RE classrooms?”***

The first research question enquired about the ways in which a dialogic space of different perspectives and dynamic emergence of meaning (Wegerif 2011) can be opened up in the context of RE secondary classrooms. Several aspects of the lesson seem to have played a role in this.

The six students and the teacher of this class were seating around a big table during the lesson. The fact that students were able to see each other directly at all times could have facilitated the interaction. In addition, the teacher’s instructions given at the beginning of the lesson played an important role:

Excerpt 1. Teacher instructions

*D: So what we’re essentially going to do is exactly as it says at the top of the sheet. So ‘with which of these would Singer and Rolston agree?’ is where we’ll start. Twelve Talking Points. So you’ll need copies of Singer and Rolston if you’ve not got them because when you decide if they agree or not you’ll need to back it up with some kind of evidence. […] I’m gonna try and say as little as possible so that you’ve got as much space as you can. Now the only thing I’m gonna say before you start is I tried to think about what order they would be best discussed in but then I couldn’t because I don’t think there is a right order so they are actually organised in alphabetical order. So I wouldn’t think you necessarily wanna start at the top and work down. You might choose to start at any point. […] Off you go.*

Three important “points” deriving from these instructions could affect dialogic practices:

* Students are expected to dominate the discussion with the teacher taking a secondary, more silent role. In fact, David’s use of the word “space” here could be paralleled to offering them dialogic space for their discussions.
* Students are expected to back up their arguments with certain parts from the texts, and;
* Students are expected to direct the discussion, since they are given the authority to choose the order in which they want to discuss each talking point.

With these instructions, the teacher clarified his role in the lesson and set the foundation for student-led discussion that would enable shared understanding and agreement. The teacher also demonstrates that he is aware of the importance of creating space for student to engage in dialogue.

While students had not been familiar with these 12 talking points prior to this lesson, they quickly engaged in meaningful discussions suggesting that they were perhaps familiar with this type of activity. The nature of the task also seems to have contributed to the opening of dialogic space. The Talking Points task generated good discussion around the extent to which the authors Singer and Rolston would agree or disagree with a list of statements (see Appendix).

Moreover, a strategy used by the teacher seems to have contributed to the creation of dialogic space. As shown in Excerpt 2, this strategy involved the teacher juxtaposing the “space” between student opinions.

Excerpt 2: Teacher-student interaction

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Line** | **Agent** | **Turn** | **Function** |
| 1 | Teacher | So let's go back to think. So we've got ((showing hierarchy with his hands))[[3]](#footnote-4) animals, plants, rivers - we've got so far. And we've now clearly defined the lines, so you're saying, where does Singer draw the line? | *Inviting opinion (opening interaction)* |
| 2 | Helen | Between animals and plants. | *Relevant response* |
| 3 | Teacher | And where does Rolston put the line? | *Invitation* |
| 4 | Helen, Sophia | Between plants and physical processes. | *Relevant response* |
| 5 | Teacher | Are you now saying that actually it doesn't go animals, plants, physical processes ((demonstrating hierarchy)). It actually goes animals and plants ((shows same level)), physical processes ((shows lower level)). And if so, what evidence have you got to say plants are as important rather than just plants have importance? | *Inviting clarification and reasoning (i.e. evidence)* |
| 6 | Mary | I think you could argue - cause he says ((reading from text)): ‘But that seems prejudice in favour of one kind of information refusing to recognise that all information can be genetic quite as much as it can be cognitive.’ So if you look at that there could be equality between animals and plants. But I think personally Rolston wouldn't s ay that plants are equal to animals because I think in this paper he's just trying to go against what Singer is saying by putting out the fact that plants genetically process information but I think he recognises the fact that animals do have more. | *Reasoning (providing evidence)* |
| 7 | Sophia | Just because they do it differently it's not any less valuable. Like it's not…by doing it differently it doesn’t immediately make it less valuable. | *Building* |
| 8 | Teacher | You see you’re saying different things. | *Emphasizing contrasting views* |
| 9 | Mary | No, I’m saying that he would say that they are less valuable than animals but he recognises the fact that cognitive processes are…people can process cognitively or genetically. However, I think he’s trying to go against Singer’s point of just saying plants have no values at all. He says that they do have value… | *Elaborating on previously expressed idea* |
| 10 | Sophia | So he is still keeping animals and then plants, but plants still do have… | *Building* |
| 11 | Mary | Value. | *Completing sentence* |
| 12 | Sophia | Process information so they do have value but its less value than animals. | *Completing sentence* |
| 13 | Helen | So they are agreeing with the point. | *Concluding (focusing on task)* |

The interaction in Excerpt 2 is initiated when the teacher invites the students to consider the hierarchy between animals, plants and rivers for the two authors under study. After some initial interjections, Mary points to a part of the text that may suggest that Rolston sees equality between animals and plants (line 6). However, she argues that despite that quote Rolston does not believe in this equality. He only writes to put forward his contradictory stance to Singer’s beliefs. Having placed animals and plants on different levels of the hierarchy, Sophia’s subsequent statement (line 7) contains a slightly different claim. She says that Rolston believes that, just because animals and plants process information differently, it does not mean that one is less valuable than the other. The teacher notices this difference in viewpoints (line 8) and explicitly addresses it. It is worth noting his use of the word “space” here. As with his instructions, David could be referring to the concept of dialogic space that would allow students to engage in dialogue. In fact, it is a strategy that he refers to in the interview data. David said that his aim was to create space for students’ interactions by giving weight to their contrasting and juxtaposing positions. In his words:

*‘[W]hat I hope I was doing was listening enough and responding enough to create space between their comments that they had to come and construct stuff in’*.

*(From post-lesson interview)*

This prompts more interjections by Mary and Sophia in an attempt to come to an agreement. Mary elaborates her thinking (line 9) and addresses processing of humans. Sophia then adds that for Rolston animals are higher than plants in the hierarchy and Mary completes her thought (line 10), which shows co-constructed thinking. Here, therefore the dialogic space was expanded when a gap between differing positions became more salient. Students felt the need to resolve this difference of opinions through extended dialogue.

The functional analysis presented in this excerpt reveals several of the forms of dialogue that are considered to be high quality. We see students taking extended turns, where they elaborate on their ideas, use evidence from the text to explain their reasoning and building on previously expressed ideas. In terms of supportive moves, these also appear in the students’ interaction. The video data show students nodding to one another, and using phrases like “I understand what you are saying but I think that.....”. These actions demonstrate that students are respecting and listening to each others’ opinions. Therefore, both the functional analysis of dialogic moves and the supportive moves identified in this excerpt suggest that students engage in high quality talk.

Finally, the RE subject seems to have played a role in the creation of dialogue space. The interview data revealed that dialogue has a very important role in RE teaching. Specifically, David referred to the nature of RE as a place to discuss big philosophical issues, such as environmental ethics, for which there is no right or wrong answer. He stated (in italics) that the role of the teacher is to help students develop *better or more nuanced answers to this kind of philogocial and ethical issues rather than actually having a body of knowledge that has been disseminated*. Developing this kind of answers requires *the ability to understand [a] variety of opinions and construct your answer on the basis of understanding those different views*. For this reason, David believes that RE *lends itself directly to the principles of dialogic learning*. In fact, David argued that this model of RE forced RE teachers to develop the skills of dialogic teaching without necessarily knowing that what they were doing was dialogic teaching.

***3.2. Research question 2: What dialogic practices are seen taking place within the dialogic space in RE secondary classrooms?***

To answer this research question, the functional analysis of the dialogic moves of an episode of this lesson showcases the role of the teacher and the students in the interaction. Excerpt 3 presents an episode from the lesson during which the discussion revolved around Talking Point G. The ‘Function’ column describes the assigned function(s) in each turn.

Excerpt 3: Teacher-student interaction

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Line** | **Agent** | **Turn** | **Function** |
| 1 | Teacher | […] What do you think about G. ‘Non-intentional physical processes can have more value.’ | *Inviting opinion (opening question)* |
| 2 | Sophia | Is this like a purpose then? | *Clarifying* |
| 3 | Mary | I don’t think that Singer would agree with that. | *Expressing opinion* |
| 4 | Teacher | Why not? | *Asking for justification* |
| 5 | Mary | No I think he would agree with that actually. Not ‘not agree’ with that. | *Change of opinion* |
| 6 | Sophia | Why? | *Asking for justification* |
| 7 | Mary | Because I think he sees a value as being able to cognitively process your surroundings or what’s going on so your ability to feel pain. So you have to have (intelligence) for your actions to have more value rather than doing things without realising that you’re doing them. | *Providing justification* |
| 8 | Sophia | Wasn’t he talking about suffering? […] Your pain is not voluntary. Like you don’t think about responding to pain. You just do. | *Challenging* |
| 9 | Mary | I think it’s the fact that you have an interest to live. So you want to live rather than you are living. | *Counter-challenging* |
| 10 | Sophia | Ok | *Accepting opinion* |
| 11 | Teacher | So Singer makes this distinction between a river and an animal in that sense then. | *Building* |
| 12 | Helen | ((inaudible)) | */* |
| 13 | Mary | Yeah. I don't think rivers want to be there. They're just there. | *Building* |
| 14 | Teacher | But rivers are valuable. | *Challenging* |
| 15 | Helen | They're valuable but it doesn’t mean that they're ((inaudible)) | *Counter-challenging* |
| 16 | Teacher | But they're not *as* valuable. | *Clarifying* |
| 17 | Mary | To Singer yeah. | *Clarifying* |
| 18 | Teacher | To Singer. | *Agreeing* |
| 19 | Helen | Yeah like that point of view. | *Agreeing* |
| 20 | Teacher | And where do plants go there? | *Inviting opinion (new direction)* |
| 21 | Helen | He didn’t like plants. | *Expressing opinion* |
| 22 | Sophia | Yeah he kind of puts them in with… | *Building* |
| 23 | Mary | Rivers and missiles | *Building* |
| 24 | Helen | They have no capacity to feel so… | *Building* |
| 25 | Teacher | Ok. So Singer, according to Rolston at least, puts plants and rivers in the same category. Why? | *Synthesizing opinions + Asking for justification* |
| 26 | John | Cause they are not sentient. | *Providing justification* |
| 27 | Teacher | Cause they are not sentient. Now why does Rolston challenge that? | *Asking for justification* |
| 28 | John | Because they are existant. | *Providing justification* |
| 29 | Helen | Yeah they still exist, they have this…they should still count as important and stuff. | *Building* |
| 30 | Lisa | Yeah ((inaudible) | *Agreeing* |
| 31 | Sophia | Yeah they still respond to…like they use information from the rest of the world around them to respond to it so that they can ((inaudible)). They just do it in a different way. | *Building* |
| 32 | Teacher | So if Singer’s got the line between sentient animals and non-sentient plants, where’s Rolston’s line between what counts and what doesn’t count? | *Inviting building (focusing)* |
| 33 | Sophia | Ability to use information? | *Expressing opinion* |
| 34 | Helen | Yes I think its… | *Agreeing* |
| 35 | Sophia | Process information. | *Building* |
| 36 | Helen | Yeah I… | *Agreeing* |
| 37 | Karen | Cognitively. | *Building* |
| 38 | Sophia | Plants don’t do it cognitively. They just kind of do it. | *Challenging* |
| 39 | Helen | The way I think of Singer is the fact that he looks at things more (emotively)[[4]](#footnote-5) and more like he looks at about their conscioussness and stuff and Rolston looks at the ability to actually learn. That’s the way I can differentiate between these two. It’s how I differentiate between these two. | *Building* |
| 40 | Teacher | Do plants learn that? | *Inviting building* |
| 41 | Helen | Well they have ability to learn… | *Expressing opinion* |
| 42 | John | The ability to adapt. | *Building* |
| 43 | Helen | Exactly. Learn is like an umbrella term for like a…better word 'information' | *Explicit agreement + Building* |
| 44 | Teacher | ((nods)) | *Accepts* |

The above excerpt demonstrates that students had a very active role in the interaction with large amounts of student talk and opportunities for extended contributions (e.g. line 7, 39). What is noteworthy here, however, is the evidence of joint refinement of ideas through building, challenging and counter-challenging each others’ ideas, all features of exploratory talk. These actions appear in chains of multiple turns at several points in the interaction. In lines 21 to 24 for example, Helen first suggested that Singer did not like plants; Sophia began her thinking on where on the hierarchy he puts them and Mary completed Sophia’s thought by adding that he puts plants with rivers and missiles. Helen built on that idea by adding that these are the things that have no capacity to feel. Similarly, in lines 33-39, Sophia responded to the teachers question on where Rolston put a line between what counts and what does not count by pointing to their ability to use information. When Helen agrees, Sophia then built on her own idea by replacing the verb “use” with “process” information. Karen added that this processing is cognitive (line 37), and Sophia then challenged that idea by pointing out that plants cannot process information cognitively; they just do it. Helen offered her view on the topic of where the two authors put their line in relation to what counts and what does not count (line 39). She said that Singer seems to place emphasis on more emotive aspects, like consioussness, while Rolston looks at the ability to learn. The chains of student turns in this interaction revealed by the functional analysis reveals, therefore, provide evidence of “interthinking” (Mercer, 2000), or in other words joint intellectual activity and joint tackling of challenging questions. Each relevant contribution expands the dialogic space because it expands the joint thinking.

Looking at the role of the teacher, three main strategies begin to emerge. The first is asking for justifications, which we observe taking place very prominently in this episode (e.g. lines 4, 25, 27). The teacher places emphasis on using evidence from the text to justify their arguments. This is clear both in the opening instructions and throughout this episode. What is particularly interesting, however, is that apart from providing justifications, the students *ask* for justifications themselves. In line 6, Sophia asks Mary to justify why she thinks Singer would not agree with Talking Point G. This suggests that providing justifications, and consequently asking for them, has become part of the classroom culture in this class.

The second strategy that characterises the teacher’s role in this episode is that of the “director” of discussion by opening new enquiries (line 1, 20) and establishing progress (e.g. synthesising in line 25). Although his opening instructions had indicated that students would be directing the discussion, David’s strategic contributions perhaps ensure the progress of the dialogue. In line 20, he opens a new enquiry to the discussion by asking about plants. Similarly, on line 25 he summarises the students’ thinking up to that point.

Finally, the third strategy that he uses is challenging opinions. In line 13, when Mary says that rivers are just there, the teacher replies (line 14) that they are valuable. This prompts a counter-challenge by Helen who argues that they are valuable but not *as* valuable. As with asking for justifications, students also challenge each other in this episode. In line 8, Sophia challenges Mary’s opinion about what Singer thinks and in line 38 she challenges Karen when she gives the example of plants not processing information cognitively. This demonstrates that the teacher’s dialogic strategies become part of the culture of this class.

Overall, while the teacher’s contribution to this discussion was minimal, his role in the discussion was central to the flow of the dialogue. He opened up enquiries for students to explore and he encouraged deeper thinking through challenging and asking for justification of opinions. He was, therefore, a driving force in the students’ discussion.

**4. Discussion and Conclusions**

***4.1. The creation of dialogic space (Research question 1)***

As seen in Section 3.1, several factors have contributed to the creation of dialogic; one of them is the classroom setting. It is not surprising that the majority of studies on the quality of classroom dialogue has been conducted with small groups of students, rather than in the whole-class context (Authors 2013). A small group setting lends itself to this type of investigation probably because a more controlled number of ideas can be expressed and therefore students are more likely to critically engage with those ideas. A whole-class setting requires the teacher’s careful management of the abundance of possible ideas to be expressed. The teacher’s choice to sit on the same table as the group of six without visiting the board may have created the sense that he is an equal participant in the discussion.

Second, the teacher’s classroom instructions articulated at the beginning of the lesson certainly played a role in the way in which the dialogue unfolded, and thus in the creation of dialogic space. This is noteworthy because the dialogue that emerged in the rest of the lesson contained the three main features of the instructions: students’ active participation, backing up of arguments and taking control of the discussion. The nature of the task has also contributed to the opening of dialogic space. Effective engagement in this discussion required significant preparation prior to the lesson, as students needed to be familiar with the texts. This would help them support their arguments using evidence from the text, which was one of the teacher’s expectations. These greater cognitive requirements resonate with Neil Mercer’s expectations, stated in his interview in Authors (2014); he stated that these requirements encountered in the secondary education context would lead to dialogue of greater sophistication.

Furthermore, the teacher’s strategy to juxtapose divergent positions contributes to the expansion of dialogic space. The expression of divergent positions creates space for dialogue because it requires students to come to a resolution (Authors 2013). In order to do that, students are more likely to engage in further explanations and justifications of their views, thus creating a more dialogic environment. This strategy, therefore, made the gap between the students’ positions more salient, creating more space for dialogue. Moreover, an ethos for dialogue seems to have been developed with students listening and respecting each other’s opinions. They seem to be open to others’ perspectives, which resonates with Bahktin’s (1981) theoretical underpinnings for dialogue. Finally, the RE subject itself contributes to the creation of an ethos for dialogue and thus, the creation of dialogic space. RE teachers encourage the expression of multiple perspectives in the classroom so that they could help their students shape their own views on controversial matters. The pedagogical aims of RE and dialogic teaching therefore seem to resonate.

***4.2. Dialogic Practices taking place within the dialogic space in RE secondary classrooms (Research Question 2)***

The results revealed large amounts of student talk with ample opportunities for extended contributions in these lessons. Specifically, chains of multiple turns provide evidence of joint refinement of ideas through building, challenging and counter-challenging each others’ ideas – all key features of productive forms of dialogue (e.g. Littleton and Mercer 2013). The role of the teacher was also of importance. In particular, David was seen employing three strategies: 1) asking for justifications, 2) directing the discussion, and 3) challenging students’ opinions. Students were not simply reacting to the teacher’s role; they were taking it on. The examples discussed in this paper show the students acting as directors of dialogue by focusing the discussion back to the Talking Point under discussion, and also asking their peers for clarifications and justifications. This behaviour suggests that the teacher was successful in creating a culture for dialogue that students have assimilated to. Dialogic teaching is a student-centred approach (Alexander 2011), where students are expected to take control of classroom dialogue.

The present paper makes a significant and original contribution to the literature because it investigates dialogic teaching in an under-researched context: RE in secondary education. Despite the small scale of this study, the bottom-up analysis of two types of data enhances the rigour of the study, as the interview data have proved useful in interpreting the observation data at several points. The context of RE proved to be an important context to study in order to understand how dialogic pedagogy can take place with older students. As a context that is condusive to dialogue dealing with ethical and philosophical questions that concern everyone, it can provide useful insights for future practice. With growing evidence from future work coming from this context, pedagogical guidelines can be created for teachers (of this and other subjects), who wish to engage with a more dialogic pedagogy.

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[To be inserted upon acceptance: Authors 2013, Authors 2014, Authors 2016, Authors 2019]

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1. All names used in this paper (teacher, students and school) are pseudonyms, so that the identity of the participants is protected. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Defined here as a change of speaker [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Physical actions [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Inaudible word [↑](#footnote-ref-5)