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A critical investigation into the use of texts to encourage meaningful dialogue in religious education: A case study of year eight students studying miracles

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Abstract

This research paper offers an interpretation of dialogic theory in a religious education classroom setting. Moving beyond Vygotsky's perception of cognitive maturity, couched in terms of monologic, the literature review explores the concept of dialogic and how this relates to the unique skills, such as intentional cognitive empathy, developed by the religiously educated. Moreover, the literature review explores how texts can best stimulate meaningful dialogue with the cultural other absent from the classroom. Such explorations result in three clearly delineated research questions that shape the classroom based investigation into how dialogic theories of learning can be applied in religious education. This research paper uses participant observations, researcher lesson evaluations and various interview techniques to ascertain if and how students are able to effectively engage with a text to enable meaningful dialogue.

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Introduction

The specific aims of this small-scale case study are rooted in wider questions of the pedagogical aims of religious education. It is clear, through a review of current literature and dialogue with experienced teachers, that there is disagreement as to: what religious education aims to do; how this is to be measured; and what a sufficiently religiously educated individual 'looks like'. It is unsurprising, given such inability to define religious education, that the discipline became the "unnecessary casualty" of Govian education reforms (Henshaw, 2010:1). Religious educations relegation from Gove's perception of 'ideal' education (Wright, 2012:7) served as an impetus for this research. Subscribing to Teece's (2011) view that the purpose of religious education is to provide its students with the appropriate vocabulary to engage meaningfully with the 'other', that is the embodiment of views *other* than the student's own, this paper investigates how the 'other' might be best represented, practically, within a classroom. Moreover, this paper explores how students might be best prepared to engage *meaningfully* (the definition of which will be discussed in due course) with the 'other'.

The school in which this case study is set is a semi-rural village college rated "good" in their most recent OfSTED inspection, with the 'behaviour and safety of pupils' rated "outstanding" (OfSTED, 2013:1). The religious education department is very small with only one specialist teacher, the head of department, and two non-specialist teachers that teach religious education regularly. The subject is compulsory at key stage 3, students receiving two hours of teacher contact time per fortnight. At key stage 4 religious education is not compulsory; students' provision of the subject is met in termly 'philosophy and PSHE days'. There is an established, and very successful, optional full-course GCSE, which achieves 100% A*-C consistently.

Representing the ethnic make-up of the school, commented as "mostly white British" (OfSTED, 2013:2), the participating class for this research comprised of 30 students in year 8 studying miracles over a four week scheme of work. The topic of miracles was already selected for their studies at the time this research project began, however, it proved useful in that it is a topic which necessitates consultation with many texts such as miracle 'accounts' and interpretations.

So to best represent the average national curriculum levels within religious education (NCL) of this non-set class, I selected five students: one boy and girl achieving national curriculum levels 3-4 in religious education; one boy and girl achieving national curriculum levels 5-6 in religious education; and one girl achieving national curriculum level 7 in religious education.

Literature Review

The core principles of dialogic theories of learning clearly delineate different 'types' of student dialogue, suggesting that some are more 'meaningful' than others (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997). There is little guidance, however, for specialist practitioners, as to how the differences in student talk might be delineated in a religious education context. That is to say that while 'meaningful' dialogue is increasingly recognised as generically important in pedagogical practice (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997), literature that explores how 'meaningful' dialogue in religious education sounds is lacking.

Therefore, this literature review will investigate the core principles of dialogic theories of learning and then compare this with the generally accepted aims and purposes of religious education, leading to suggestions as to how 'meaningful' dialogue might 'sound' in the religious education classroom. Taking an intentional *empathy* with the view of the *other* (literally to be read as a view other than one's own) as a theme running throughout dialogic theories and the purposes of religious education, this paper will then postulate how texts might be used to encourage cognitive empathy with the absent other. By absent other, this paper is referring to the views of another who is absent in the dialogue, or embodied in the dialogue by a text (Bakhtin, 1986:126; Wegerif, 2011:181). This exploration will result in three research questions that hinge on the critical parts of the literature reviewed.

Dialogic Learning

Dialogic theories of learning were inspired by Vygotsky's theories of development. Indentifying access to abstract rationality as the ultimate goal of cognitive maturity (Vygotsky, 1986:263; Wertsch, 1991), his theory of 'internalisation' highlighted the importance of interaction, specifically language, as a tool for facilitating a child's cognitive development "in the direction of a purely logical thought" (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997:50). This monological perception establishes a Vygotskian horizon of development that consists of pure, equal and perfectly congruent concepts, thus constituting a "self-contained logical system" (Vygotsky, 1986:201; Wegerif & Mercer, 1997:51).

Recent developments in theories of dialogic, however, differ slightly from Vygotsky in terms of his perception of cogitative maturity. The term 'dialogic', driving from the Greek *dia* and *logos* literally translating to "through" discourse (Strongs, 1995:1617), is a direct contrast to a single or *mono*logic strongly insinuated in Vygotskian theories of development. Such a term has been widely used, both in developmental theories and later adapted by educationalists, to represent the theory that *understanding* itself is the result of more than one voice (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997:52). In this way, meaning is no longer found in a "self-contained logical system" but is, in Wegerif and Mercer's interpretation of Volosinov's theory of dialogic, found in "different voices and different perspectives" (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997:51). In the words of Vygotsky's contemporary, meaning(s) is not fixed nor absolute, but is constructed through dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981). Moving sharply away from a contained, Vygotskian, view of the self proponents of dialogic theory begun to understand the self as necessarily multiple; the self is a reflection of a "dialogue containing many different voices" (Sampson, 1993, cited in Wegerif & Mercer, 1997:52).

In a broad sense, Vygotskian goals of social interaction are in agreement with developed theories of dialogic: dialogue is the process by which identity is born (Vygotsky, 1978). However, dialogue is no longer the mere 'direction' through which *meaning* or logic is reached. In theories of dialogic, *meaningful* dialogue constructs knowledge and is thus the very evidence of cognitive maturity. Alexander, building on the work of Bruner, was one of the first proponents of dialogic learning that began to identify the importance of fostering understanding through collaboration (Alexander, 2004:23; Bruner, 1996:55). Bringing together the work of Wells (1999) and Mercer (2000), Alexander highlights reciprocity as the heart of dialogic theories of learning that challenges the

"cognitively restricting rituals" of whole classroom teaching (Alexander, 2004:14) principally in favour of Mercer's 'interthinking' style of learning that promotes a reciprocal cycle through which meaning can be constructed (Alexander, 2004:24; Mercer, 2000).

Types of Dialogue

There have been numerous 'types' of dialogue postulated by theorists cited above. For the purposes of this paper, three broad types are delineated to apply in a religious education setting that, arguably, best summarise current literature. Firstly, Mercer identifies a type of dialogue he argues to be least cognitively challenging: disputational talk. This talk is best characterised as "individualised decision making" (Mercer, 1995:104) and is evidenced by a predominant amount of assertions, challengers or counter assertions that inhibit a reciprocal cycle within the dialogue. Secondly, Wegerif and Mercer (1997) identify 'cumulative' type of talk: dialogue in which students work together to construct some kind of meaning between each other, but is often limited in that students are simply 'building' on each other's contributions without critical engagement. The most cognitively challenging type of talk, identified by Wegerif and Mercer (1997) is 'exploratory', carrying the hallmarks of *meaningful* dialogue discussed above. In this type of talking a dialogue is maintained within which participants are critically accountable for one another as they, collaboratively, construct meaning (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997:53).

These three types of talk are easily related to subject specific pedagogies which has led to wide discussions about how dialogic learning sounds in a number of subjects. There has been, however, little literature that evidences how the application of such theories 'sound' in the religious education classroom. This is perhaps unsurprising given the lack of consensus about the core aims and purposes of the subject, "...it is evident that there is uncertainty among many RE teachers about what they are trying to achieve in the subject" (OfSTED, 2010:41). With a lack of clarity between practitioners as to whether religious education is about: an evaluation of world religions; the development of positive attitudes to religious difference; the spiritual and moral development of pupils or; the fostering of respect for difference between religions, it is difficult to delineate what a religious educated person should sound like (OfSTED, 2010:42).

There is not space in this paper, however, to explore this debate fully. In my own reading of this debate, particularly in relation to the importance of dialogic in education, there are two important summery points to make. Firstly religious education is, although often situated among the

Humanities (a situation I agree with), not simply a heuristic device. That is to say that the religiously educated are not only equipped with the skills to interpret the world around them, but also developed in their ability to *be* in the world (Teece, 2011:1). In navigating ways of *being* in the world, religiously educated students necessarily enter into dialogue with Sampson's (Sampson, 1993, cited in Wegerif & Mercer, 1997:52 multitude of voices and perspectives and yet there is still a limited amount of literature that has investigated how such a dialogue sounds.

The second important point to make is that skills, as well as knowledge, developed in the religiously educated are unique. Aiming to assist students in their navigation through a globalised multi-faith society (Wright, 2012), OfSTED have articulated the importance of religious education contributing "to pupil's development, both personal and academic. It does so by promoting respect and empathy" (OfSTED, Press Report, 2011). The term empathy is interesting here, particularly given there is little guidance as to how this looks or sounds in religious education. Inescapably tied in a relationship with difference or the 'other', empathy is inescapably part of dialogue in religious education and it is therefore important to explore how it might sound in a classroom setting.

Prior to this, however, it would be appropriate to explore recent developments in the study of empathy within the Academy more broadly. A brief focus on the scientific research in the area of human empathy will help to avoid speculation as to a more precise definition of the subject, setting the research aims of this paper against empirical data regarding child development: an area of crucial importance in any detailed study of pedagogical practice.

What is empathy?

The importance of empathy as one might define, "the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing... of another" (Dictionary.com, 2014) has been a matter of concern in philosophy since Aristotle. In postulating that the "self naturally mirrors the other", Aristotle continues to spark debate between those concerned with theories of mind, particularly with the problem of 'other' minds and the delineation of the process of empathy (Gallagher, 2013:1).

Being motivated by the discovery of mirror neurons in the premotor cortex, neuroscientists are divided as to whether empathy is an unintended neurological response or something more intentional and cognitively *learned*. As such, contemporary definitions of empathy have a footing in two distinct fields: the operation of neurological resonance systems and, contrastingly, a higher-

order cognitive understanding. Decety offers a third, more constructive, approach to defining empathy in an attempt to bring these two fields together. He suggests that 'empathy' is a result of unintentional resonance systems, a controlled or intentional insight into the perspective of the other and the ability to differentiate between self and other (Decety, 2005).

Gallagher, in a Wittgensteinian style, helpfully bypasses this conceptual debate by suggesting empathy is context dependant and can be delineated into neurological (or "elementary") empathy and a higher cognitive *skill* (or "empathetic understanding") (Gallagher, 2013:3). With this delineation Gallagher, albeit concerned with philosophical theories of mind, asks what does it *take* for a person to move beyond "elementary" empathy through to "empathetic understanding"?

If, by the standards of OfSTED, religious education should actively promote and encourage the development of empathy, then the question as to how a person moves toward empathetic understanding must be of paramount pedagogical concern. Such a concern is reflected by Wegerif in his development of "dialogic space" (Wegerif, 2011:180).

Empathy in classroom dialogue

For Wegerif, Gallagher's international cognitive empathy distinguishes an interaction from a genuine and *meaningful* dialogue (Wegerif, 2011:179-180). To create a 'space' within which meaning can be constructed, a dialogue must be critically empathetic of the perspective of the 'other'. Pertinently, this builds upon Mercer's theory of interthinking (1997) which relies of participants of a dialogue working together to cumulatively create meaning. Critical of Mercer's cumulative style of talk as meaningful, Wegerif identifies a tendency of this talk to lends itself to a 'horizontal' dialogue, where students are merely agreeing with each other giving the appearance of critical engagement.

A telling characteristic of a critical dialogue, according to Wegerif, is an intentional cognitive empathy with the view of the 'other', which fundamentally differs from a horizontal working together. The 'other' is not limited to the present participants of a dialogue, but consists also of interplays with absent others in the form of cultural voices often embodied in a text (Wegerif, 2011:180). Building on Mercer's cumulative and exploratory talk (Wegerif and Mercer, 1997), Wegerif insinuates that meaningful dialogue takes place when a child can cognitively empathise with the views of the absent other and synthesise present and absent views into a new understanding

(Wegerif, 2011:181). Drawing on Bahktin's establishment of the "super-addressee", Wegerif identifies one way the absent other could be embodied is in a text (Bakhtin, 1986:126; Wegerif, 2011:181). Religious education is a subject that has access to an abundant amount of text, sourced from across significant religious and cultural differences, that have the potential to embody the views of the absent other in meaningful dialogue in religious education. However, there has yet been any mainstream research that explores how dialogue with these texts sounds.

There appears to be, then, two concerns about the application of dialogic theory in religious education that are not sufficiently addressed by the surrounding literature: simply, what does *meaningful* dialogue, that is dialogue that is evidence of cognitive empathy, sound like in religious education and how does this differ from other types of talk? Research into the purposes of religious education suggests that meaningful dialogue in religious education should have something to do with a cognitive empathetic understanding of the 'other'. Secondly, how can students best engage with texts as an effective stimulus for this kind of meaningful dialogue in religious education? Therefore, this case study can delineate three research questions that hinge on these critical concerns to best frame its research:

1) How do students link dialogue, an engagement with text and their learning in religious education lesson?

2) Are texts an effective stimulus for dialogic learning in religious education?

3) What are the features of meaningful dialogue in religious education?

Methodology

Prior to the discussion of the particular methods of this research project, it is necessary to outline the paradigm within which the research, and subsequent data, is set. This project is not positivist in methodology. That is to say that this research project does not aim to acknowledge, define or investigate a 'truth' (McNiff, 1992:5). By researching how texts might affect the quality of dialogue in religious education classroom settings, this paper is ultimately concerned with the way knowledge is dialogically *constructed* by students. Thus, it is useful to describe this research as interpretivist; that which is concerned to establish potential meaning to that which is experienced (Tabor, 2007:14).

Yin distinguishes case study research from other types of social scientific research as the most effective when concerned with asking 'how' and 'why' questions in "real-life contexts" (Yin, 2009:2). The current pedagogical practices within the religious education lessons of the participants chosen for this research included an established use of direct texts and dialogic teaching techniques. Given I want to observe this phenomenon making as few changes considered alien to the students as possible, it is fair to describe this research as a case study.

However, given the various variables that are both inescapably unique to the particulars of the participants and environment of this small scale research project, coupled with the breadth of possibility within the phenomenon being researched, it is important to carefully consider how any data gathered would be both reliable and trustworthy. The validity of data is integral to social scientific research, but it is important to consider the differences in how 'valid' research is considered between positivist and interpretivist research paradigms. A positivist research project would expect reliable data to produce the same, or similar, results under consistent conditions which is then 'read' in reference to "pre-specified forms of logic" (Willis, 2008:258). This method of validation cannot be used in the interpretivist paradigm this research is working within, where a concern for the way knowledge is *constructed* is paramount, and therefore there is no single 'truth' to be consistently tested.

Therefore, in an effort to distinguish concerns between positivist and interpretivist social scientific data, it is perhaps more appropriate to use terms like trustworthy or authentic in relation to the interpretation of data presented in this research paper, as opposed to reliable and valid (Taber, 2007:49 and 189). In response to this concern, both Yin and Struman suggest a "convergence of data collection" (Yin, 2009:2) that each investigates a part of the main research question (Struman, 1994:61). Triangulating methods of data collection in this way helps to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings and conclusions drawn from this research paper. Figures identifying this convergence of data collection are included in the presentation of data for each research question.

Lesson sequence

The research for this paper was undertaken over series of four lessons set within a scheme of work for year 8s studying 'miracles'. The plan for the delivery of lessons and the data collections are shown in Figure 1.
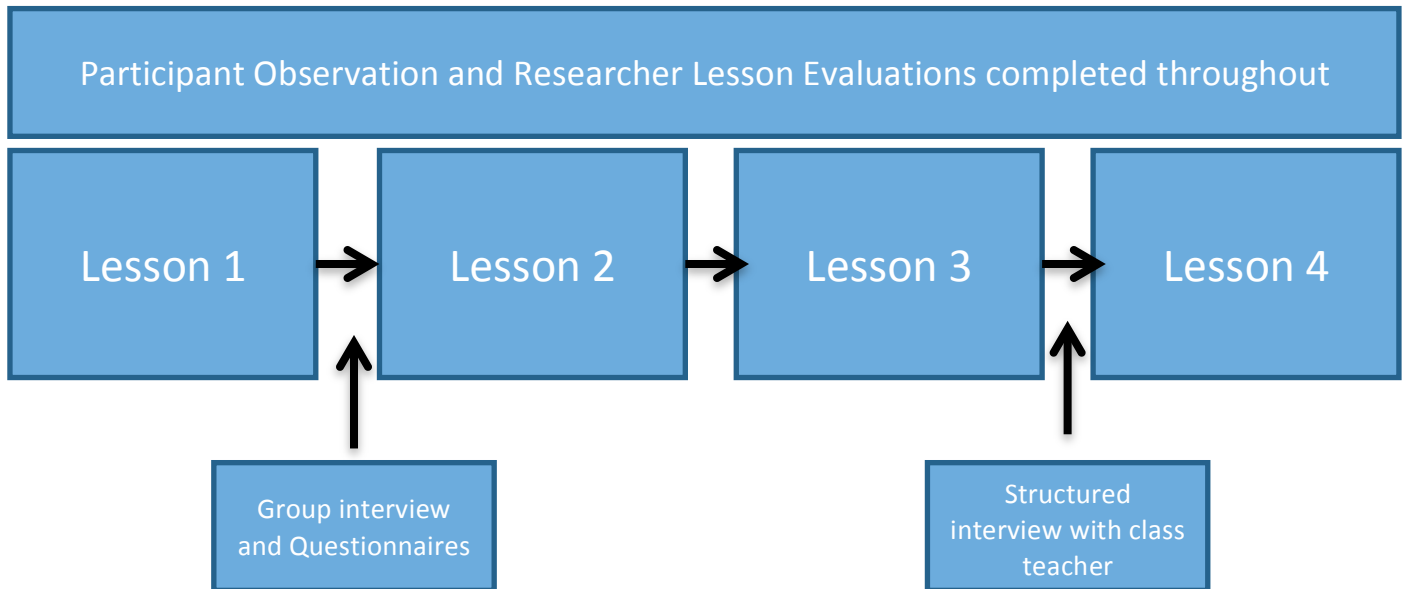
Figure 1: Lesson Sequence

When observing the use of texts in dialogic teaching techniques within the department I observed four distinct stages per lesson:

- Stage one was general talk between two or three students about a particular issue, giving time for students to share initial ideas and mind-map definitions to assist in the cracking of key concepts. There was no support or scaffold for this talk; there was no direct text and no instructions for students other than to talk about/discuss their thoughts on a particular issue.

- Stage two marked the introduction of a text, often read as a class and includes a few recall tasks to gage basic student understanding and participation. The students were then given time to have open discussion about the text, often given a single question as a guide.

- Stage three marked the introduction of a scaffold in some form, often the teacher offering opened questions that required a higher level order thinking skills, thus stretching students to a 'meaningful' discussion.

- Stage four marked the introduction of a differentiated scaffold when required. In this stage, the teacher offered questions that were accessible to students struggling with the scaffold offered in the previous stage.

When planning my sequence of lessons, designed to investigate the relationship between the quality of student dialogue and direct texts, I decided to broadly keep this structure of dialogic activity so to best observe the trajectory of dialogue quality throughout the lesson.

Ethics

In an effort to ensure that the data presented in this research project was gained using an "ethically acceptable" methodology (BERA, 2011:4-5), this research project followed the ethical guidelines as set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). This is particularly important in this research project given data collection relies, completely, on human interaction with adults and minors. Taking the role of the researcher to protect the participants of this investigation from any harm seriously, I made all effort when planning the research design and collating the required data to protect the participants from any kind of harm.

Therefore, I spoke with the Professional Tutor to ensure all correct school policies were followed throughout this research project. The Professional Tutor informed me that student consent from the class participating in my research falls under the signed agreement between the Head teacher and the legal guardians of the students. I did not, therefore, have to contact any legal guardians to continue with this research project.

Following BERA guidelines all participants were anonymised, referring to participating students by pseudo-names that reflect their ethnic background and participating teachers as 'class teacher'.

Sampling

The five students who participated in this case study were randomly selected from groups that best represent the ethnic diversity, socio-economic and national curriculum range in the class. They were given pseudo-names for the purpose of this study to reflect their ethnic context. All students in the class were from a predominantly lower-middle class background, achieving national curriculum levels in religious education ranging between 4c and 7a. The parameters of this research project would only allow for a small sample, highlighting a significant limitation in the application of this projects findings.

Researcher evaluations

My activity in this research project is best described as 'complete participant'. This refers to the researcher who is studying the context within which they find themselves. I am a training teacher of religious education and the participating class had been taught by me for half a term before the sequence of research lessons. This has many advantages, namely the ease of access into the environment I was studying. I needed no introduction to the participants, and was already established in the logistical running of the classroom, allowing me to deliver the sequence of research lessons with minimal unexpected difficulty. Having already developed a relationship with the participants, I was able to better understand and navigate their particular behaviours in a way that an outsider would not be able to do (Tracy, 2013:107).

To make use of this relationship I decided to write an evaluation of each research lesson. These evaluations followed a similar design to the participant observations, focusing on the type of dialogue the participants were engaged in. Given I was unable to observe participant dialogue in a detailed way, as the class teacher, the purpose of such evaluations are to triangulate the observations made by the other participant observer, who in the case of this investigation is the class teacher, so to ensure the data gathered is as accurate and trustworthy as possible. A copy of the relevant notes made is included in the appendix (Appendices 1 and 2).

Interviews

Tracy notes that interviews "serve as an efficient method" to get to the very centre of a research aim, allowing the researcher the opportunity to respond to issues raised using other methods of data collected (Tracy, 2012:44). This depends, however, on the type of interview chosen by the researcher. Broadly, there are three types of interview: structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Thomas, 2009). If I were interviewing a number of different participants, on separate occasions, to compare their responses, it would be important to structure an interview that maintains consistency from interview to interview. However, given the interviews I carried out in this research project were designed to be a compliment to data collected using questionnaires, giving me the opportunity to respond to "observations or hearsay, and to ask interviews to verify, refute, defend or expand" (Tracy, 2012: 44), I decided to design a semi-structured interview.

In an effort to be an effective, self-reflective interviewer, considering how the particulars of the participants "might impact the interview process and results" (Tracy, 2012:4) I conducted a small pilot interview with randomly selected students of the same age. Concerned with the way my questions were structured, I noted how these students responded to the language of the questions and where I might need to be prepared to differentiate. Making the required changes to the questions in such a way that did not lead participant answers, and taking into account the time-constraints of the participants, I carried out a single group interview of all five participants. I built into the questions potential differentiated language and explanations, should they be needed, so the participants were able to provide me with data relevant to the questions I had prepared.

Data collected from a semi-structured group interview is liable to be effect by a number of factors. For example, it is entirely possible that peer-pressure would affect how a student might answer a question. This very much depends on the character of the students participating in the study, and I purposefully selected students that have a tendency to speak their mind regardless of the group they find themselves in. Additionally, there is the potential that students may react to, or be persuaded by, the answers given by other students thus misleading the data. By using a semi-structured interview as a method, however, I am able to intervene and prompt student engagement if required. Considering students may also react to this, I will only intervene if absolutely necessary.

Due to the time-constraints of student participants, I interviewed all five in a single group interviewing keeping *verbatim* records in shorthand to be transcribed. Considering similar time-constraints of the teacher participant, I e-mailed her the questions before the interview giving her an opportunity to prepare her answers at a time that suited her in preparation for the interview (notes from the Teacher interview are included in Appendix 3.

Participant observation

Participant observation is one of many data collection methods that is used in social scientific research interested in "understanding the nature of phenomena" (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002:2). In this method, the observer is known to the participants, in this study the observer was the class's usual teacher, and forms part of the environment in which the research is taking place. A number of limitations of this method have been noted, including the potential for the presence of the observer to unwittingly change the behaviour of the participants, thus leading the data. In an effort to counter such limitations, the observer in this research project was already known to the participating class,

and was often present in the lessons prior to the sequence of research lessons. In addition to this, although having the freedom to move around the classroom environment, the observer was instructed to make an effort to simply listen and record the required data.

When designing this research project, it was important for me to think carefully about how I would like the data collected using this method to be presented. It would not be appropriate to expect the observer to write, *verbatim*, the behaviours and discussions of the participants of this research. Therefore, I gave the observer a selection of descriptions that best relate to the different types of dialogue identified in my review of relevant literature and asked her to note what best describes the discussion of the participants at each stage of the dialogic activity. I then gave space for the observer to provide direct examples that illustrate the type of dialogue the participants were engaged in. Given the observer had to be necessarily selective in her recordings of participant dialogue, this data was triangulated with my own evaluations and the products of the participants to ensure its trustworthiness.

Questionnaires

Broadly, there are two types of questionnaire; those predominantly using open-ended questions and those using closed questions. While the former provide participants with the opportunity to elaborate on answers, potentially giving the researcher a depth in data not achieved using closed questions, could prove difficult to code and might not provide data relevant to the researcher's aims (White & McBurney, 2007:219). The reverse problem can be found using closed questions: there is no space for the participants to elaborate on potentially anomalous data, and it would be difficult, if at all possible for the researcher to discern as to whether the participant has digested and understood the question.

In response to this, I carried out a pilot questionnaire using both open-ended and closed questions to examine the nature of the data collected. It was evident through the open-ended questions that majority of participants in this pilot study appeared to understand the closed questions and that the data collected from the closed questions was easier to code and compile for comparison than the data collected from the open-ended questions. This was primary because the participants either did not possess the literacy skills to effectively explain their answers in a way that would be productive for this research paper, or they did not have the time to finish their answers. In a number of cases, it

would have been beneficial for the participants to have written in more detail and with greater clarity.

Therefore, I decided to design a questionnaire with closed questions, providing participants with multiple choice answers. After collating the data from these questionnaires, I constructed questions for the semi-structured group interview that complemented the apparent themes. This enabled me to collect more detailed data directly related to the research question and the data collected so far, steering the research according to the common themes appearing.

Using closed questions eliminates any possibility of collecting qualitative data, which particularly concerning given the interpretavist paradigm this research paper is set. However, this questionnaire is only one method of data collection used in this research paper, complimented by the more qualitative interview method. A blank copy of the questionnaire is included in the appendix (Appendix 4).

Data Presentation and Discussion

The presentation and discussion of the collected data is split into the relevant research questions. For ease of presentation, some data has been processed according to descriptive codes developed from the review of the literature. For example, the characterisation of student dialogue has been delineated according to the three types of dialogue identified in the literature (*Types of Dialogue* subsection): disputational; cumulative; and meaningful (evidence of cognitive empathy). The data that has been coded in this way has been clearly indicated.

To analyse the data I have used the "open" method of deductive coding (Robson, 1993:149). I have highlighted key themes evident throughout the data, which converge with the points made in the literature review, to be used as sub-headings in the discussion section.

Research Question One: How do students link dialogue, an engagement with text and their learning in religious education lesson?

Figure 2 illustrates the three methods used to collect data for this research question.
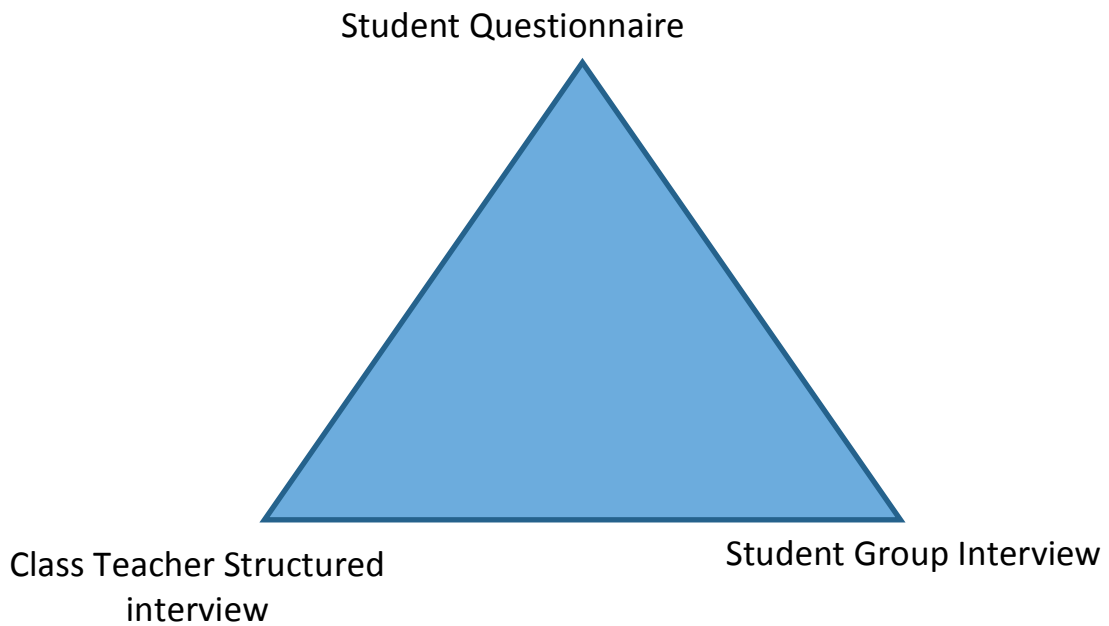
Student Questionnaire

Class Teacher Structured
interview

Student Group Interview

Figure 2: Triangulation of Methods (RQ1)

Presentation of Data for Research Question One

Questionnaire Data

Table 1 illustrates the answers to the question, 'Why might a teacher ask you to discuss a text you have read in a religious education lesson?'

Name of Student	Answer Given
Tom (NCL 3-4)	Answer 1: To challenge each other's answers
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	Answer 1: To challenge each other's answers
James (NCL 4-5)	Answer 2: To look for the right answer together
Lucy (NCL 4-5)	Answer 2: To look for the right answer together
Laura (NCL 7)	Answer 3: To look from a different perspective

Table 1: Questionnaire Data RQ1

Group Interview Data

For ease of presentation, I organised the data collected from the student group interview using descriptive codes.

Why are texts important in religious education?

Descriptive Code	Evidence from interview
Not important/no specific answer	Tom (NCL 3-4) did not answer this question.
To find evidence to answer a question/support points	Niamh (NCL 3-4): "... you can get the right answer." Niamh (NCL 3-4): "If you ever get stuck you can try to find the answer in the text. There's always something to write about." James (NCL 5-6): "You can get the right kind of example in your PEE paragraph." Laura (NCL 7): "We are always told how important it is to write in PEE paragraphs, and evidence is really important in that."
To encourage perception from another perspective	Laura (NCL 7): "Texts are like the root of all different things in religions. Like Jews and Christians share some of the same text, but have different views."

Table 2: Group Interview Data RQ1

Why might it be important to use texts when discussing something in religious education?

Descriptive Code	Evidence from interview
To challenge each other's answers	Tom (NCL 3-4): "You get to have an argument sometimes." Niamh (NCL 3-4): "... debate in RE is great. Sometimes people are really wrong!" James (NCL 5-6): "... sometimes people get it wrong in the group and it's good to tell them that they are wrong before they write it down."
To work together to find the right answer	Niamh (NCL 3-4): "...'cause you can chat with the person next to you to see if you've got it right." James (NCL 5-6): "As they say, two heads are better than one!... as a team"
To look from a different perspective	Laura (NCL 7): "Texts are like everywhere in RE and people interpret them differently." Laura (NCL 7): "You can use what you see in a text to help you with what you think."

Table 3: Group Interview Data RQ1

Structured Interview Data

For ease of presentation, I organised the data collected from the structured interview in Table 4.

How do you think students link the use of texts and the quality of their discussion in religious education and why?

How do students use a direct text?	Evidence from interview
To challenge each other's answers	"Students love a debate. The difference is, the debate is quite constructive when students know what kind of questions to engage with critically. Generally, students who have lower ability ranges tend to just argue and disagree with each other without further engagement probably because they are not used to engaging in a text in anymore depth"
To work together to find the right answer	"Most appreciate the opportunity to analyse something, but do so because they think they are trying to find a correct answer or something similar. They often think discussion around a text is like a big comprehension task." "Students with limited literacy skills ... are more inclined to look for a single right answer. In my experience, students with limited literacy skills prefer to talk more but often, though not always, have under developed oracy skill, too"
To look from a different perspective	"I very rarely see students understand, without sufficient scaffolding, that texts are interpreted differently by different people in year eight. The times I do see it are generally among students with higher national curriculum levels."

Table 4: Structured Interview Data RQ1

Discussion of Data from Research Question One

Skill acquisition

The national curriculum levels allocated to the students throughout the participating school are interpreted against Blooms Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956). Therefore, Laura working consistently at level seven indicates that she has acquired, and currently sharpening, the skill of synthesis; the ability to synthesise the information learned in the lesson into a meaning constructed by the student. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, to observe that Laura is the only student in the group interview to highlight the importance of using texts in dialogic learning activities to help formulate her own ideas, "You can use what you see in a text to help you with what you think" (Table 3). Having consistently achieved synthesis of knowledge in her class work and assessments to receive a

national curriculum level seven, Laura is well averse in what it means to synthesise and therefore how to use a text to recognise the importance of the absent other.

As can be predicted, students who have not yet achieved a national curriculum level seven are less likely to understand how a text can embody a perspective of the absent other. Tom, consistently achieving levels that indicate he is able to repeat and describe but still learning what it is to explain. Therefore, the experience Tom has had with texts hinge on practicing his ability to describe its key events, answers to which are generally considered correct or incorrect. Thus, it is unsurprising that he perceived the importance of dialogic learning activities as the creation of a space where debate and disagreement can be had over what the correct answer is. What else, one might ask, is there to discuss, if there is a correct answer?

Skill acquisition as a theme is also apparent throughout the interview with the class teacher. Data collected from this interview suggests that teachers believe students who are less able are more inclined to believe that there is a correct answer hidden somewhere in the text, presumed by the teacher to be the result of a lack of experience in any interaction more meaningful with the text.

There is, however, a slight disparity between the data collated from the questionnaire (presented in Table 1) and that collated from the group interview (presented in Table 3). Students, such as James, indicated in the questionnaire that the most important purpose of dialogic activities in relation to a text is to work together to find the correct answer, indicative of a tendency toward cumulative rather than disputational talk (Table 3). However, during the group interview James also indicates a slight tendency toward disputing the answers of others in the dialogue. A similar situation is also true for Niamh. This suggests that disputational talk can also form part of an underdeveloped cumulative style of talk provided students are still working toward the aim of finding an answer: rather than working together in an equal sense, some students are quick to disagree with students in recognition that there is a right answer which has yet to be found.

Ultimately, this data suggests that the previous skills acquired by the students are an important part of using a text to encourage meaningful dialogue in religious education. Students, according to this data, are unlikely to have the propensity to engage in cognitive empathy, nor recognise cognitive empathy as important, unless they have experienced related skills such as synthesis. In addition to this, there appears to be a closer relationship between disputational talk and the beginnings of cumulative talk that share a perception of a correct answer.

Literacy Levels

The skills previously acquired by students are not just limited to those identified in Blooms Taxonomy. The data collated from the group and structured interview (presented in Tables 3 and 4) suggest that the general literacy skills of the students is an integral part of their access to the text.

The teacher in the structured interview noted how students with "lower level literacy skills" (Figure 5) are more inclined to look for a single right answer. Preferring to talk more, presumably part of a lack of confidence due to lower literacy skills, such students find is difficult to have much to talk about beyond searching for a right answer. Skills of synthesis and evaluation, which necessitate a level of cognitive empathy, are impossible to develop when students find the text literarily challenging. Also, when students are not able to access the text because of their literacy, they are more likely to engage in off topic conversation and therefore disrupting the dialogue which is made apparent in data presented for the additional research questions for this paper. In an effort to tackle the problem of accessibility for students with lower commands of literacy, the use of scaffolding formed a large part of the data discussion in the additional research questions.

Two features, then, dictate the accessibility of a text used in dialogic learning to students. Firstly, if the skill level of the student is one that has no experience of using a text beyond comprehension, then this research has observed that such a student will be unable to access that text as an embodiment of an absent other. Secondly, if the student has limited literacy skills, then this research has observed that the student will be unable to access the text to a level that would enable a meaningful interaction.

Research Question Two: Are texts a good stimulus for dialogic teaching in religious education?
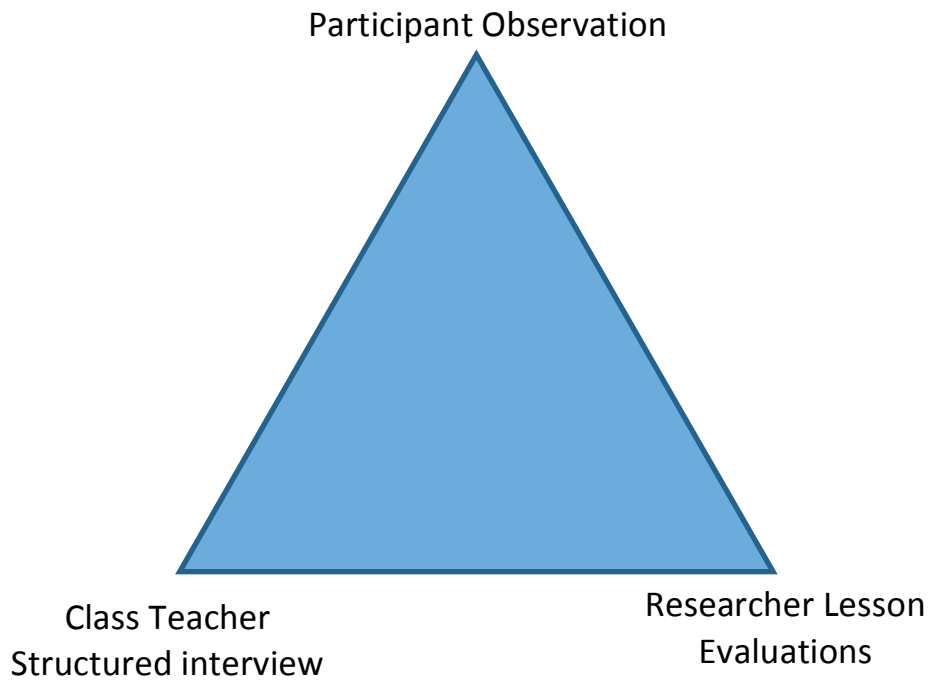
Participant Observation

Class Teacher
Structured interview

Researcher Lesson
Evaluations

Figure 1: Triangulation of Methods (RQ2)

Presentation of Data from Research Question Two

Participant Observation Data

For ease of presentation, I have collated the observation log (Appendix 1) in Table 5 including what best characterises the nature of dialogue between participants in each stage of the lesson.

Researcher Lesson Evaluations Data

For ease of presentation, I have collated the researcher evaluation log (Appendix 2) in Table 6 quoting what best characterises the nature of dialogue between participants in each stage of the lesson.

Before the introduction of a direct text	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"finding it hard to understand. "I don't get it"" "...engaging in lots of off topic conversation"
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"is being encouraged to do so by ... people"
James (NCL 5-6)	"... would like to participate but is only doing so superficially, agreeing with [others]"
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"... recognises that there is a set of right answer, and just repeats them without giving much away as to her thought processes"
Laura (NCL 7)	"Engaging in good discussion, taking into account the views of different people"
Once the direct text had been introduced	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"Tom is very focused on the 'actual' events, as if trying to prove something did or didn't 'actually' happen"
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"..appears to be pretty guided by Tom, and not really engaging with the text in a meaningful way- quite superficial"
James (NCL 5-6)	"... dialogue is more meaningful" "finding evidence"
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"Still can't seem to move on from the 'actual' events" "Seems concerned as to the author of the text [commentary on Gospel of Mark] and spends some time trying to prove it wrong with her knowledge of the actual text of the Gospel"
Laura (NCL 7)	"... continues to talk about the view point of others..."
Introduction of talking points	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"seems more interested in trying to understand the talking points rather than making any reference to the text"
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	" "... started to also engage with the talking points using the texts, although still quite superficial"
James (NCL 5-6)	"has now understood the point of looking at a text and is linking up bits of it that seems relevant to each talking point"
Laura (NCL 7)	"appears to enjoy the challenge of looking at things from a view she hadn't thought of herself"
Introduction of differentiated talking points	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"Okay, so someone who believes in God would think that this obviously happened"
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"Now seems to be more able to discuss her own thoughts, because Tom better understands the talking points."
James (NCL 5-6)	"Continues talk with little difference"
Laura (NCL 7)	"Doesn't really seem to affect her discussion quality"

Table 5: Participant Observation Data RQ2

Before the introduction of a direct text	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"I don't understand" "I don't get it" "What are we talking about" [Off topic chat]
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"I think you're right." "No, maybe it is more what he said before." "What's an allegory?" [Off topic chat]
James (NCL 5-6)	"I think I agree with you"
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"Yeah, I think it's more about an allegory."
Laura (NCL 7)	"Well it depends who you're talking to. A theist might think it's an allegory but an atheist would just think it's all made up. Probably."
Once the direct text had been introduced	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"Well this is just silly. I can't actually happen. Can it?" "No. It's all made up." [Off topic chat]
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"Probably not actually true. A nice story though."
James (NCL 5-6)	"Yeah, so here it says ... that probably means ..." "It says it right here"
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"Can this happen? Why do people believe this?" "Yeah, look right here. This bit could mean..."
Laura (NCL 7)	"Okay, so a theist would probably interpret this bit as being about God, you know, how powerful he is and stuff" "Oh, so maybe it actually means this..."
Introduction of talking points	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"So, a theist, is that right?, would think that this is all true?" "I'm not sure. What has a scientist got to do with it?"
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"So a theist would think this bit is true, like, happened."
James (NCL 5-6)	"This bit, then, is a bit like how an agnostic would respond, but like, more"
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"Do you really think so? I'm not so sure. Like, wouldn't a scientist be more interested in..."
Laura (NCL 7)	"A doctor would probably ... because"
Introduction of differentiated talking points	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"So a scientist might have a problem because his job is to, like, prove things. And this obviously didn't happen."
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"This bit here might be hard for a doctor to believe."
James (NCL 5-6)	"So, a doctor would probably look for another answer for this. You know, like maybe he wasn't actually fully blind."
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"It's actually quite different. I thought they might just think..."
Laura (NCL 7)	"Another religious person, like, from a different religion, might think..."

Table 6: Researcher Lesson Evaluation Data RQ2

Figure 4 is an excerpt from the researcher lesson evaluations that answers the question, 'What best characterises the students' engagement each text?'

> Section from a commentary on the Gospel of Mark:
> Student engagement with this text was not as developed as I had expected it to be. Rather than being quite interested in how another person interpreted the Gospel of Mark, they were spending more time trying to piece together what they did and didn't know about the Gospel of Mark already, which turned out to be not that much. Obviously then it was difficult for them to engage with the text. It was almost as though the students didn't know if they could or couldn't trust the commentary because they hadn't read the text it was commenting on.
> Section from the Gospel of John:
> Students engaged with this texts much quicker than they did with the commentary. I had predicted this could happen given they way they reacted to the commentary. Students had much more confidence in trusting the text because they could see it was the authentic text and not filtered through someone else before they had access to it.

Figure 2: Researcher lesson evaluation data RQ2

Class Teacher Structured Interview Data

Figure 5 is an excerpt from the notes collected during the structured interview answering the question, 'Does an engagement with a text affect the quality of student discussion in religious education?'

> Texts, I think, have a number of effects on the quality of discussion being had by students. Quite often, in my experience, if you don't provide students with anything to focus on in their discussions then they can quickly go off topic. Sometimes they won't even realise it. So texts can help students stay on topic.
> If, as we said, good discussion in dialogic teaching is about learning the *other* perspective then texts are really usefully, particularly ones that are RE authentic. We don't always have the resources to bring in a person who can best represent whatever view it is that would be the *other*, so using a text can often be the next best thing.
> I think an important thing to say about texts is that one text is not always appropriately accessible to all. Students with lower literacy skills are obviously less able to access the text than those with more developed literacy skills. Also, those who have secured the ability to describe, explain and evaluate are going to be more comfortable with the use of a text in more creative, analytical ways than students still working hard to describe.

Figure 5: Excerpt from Structured Interview RQ2

Discussion of Data from Research Question Two

Perceived authenticity and prior experience with texts

A common theme throughout the data collected for this research question was the authenticity of the selected texts used to improve the quality of the dialogue with students. The researcher lesson evaluations note how the type of text used in the lesson significantly affected student engagement with it, thus affecting the quality of dialogue had with it. For example, students exhibited a lack of confidence when approaching the commentary on the Gospel of Mark, spending most of their discussion time attempting to piece together what they knew about the text being commented on. This is evidenced squarely by Lucy's approach to the text recorded in the participant observation data (Table 5) which appears to be generally suspicious of the texts providence, "...seems to be concerned as to the author of the text". As a result, little or no time was spent developing a dialogic space within which meaningful dialogue occurred.

Contrastingly, the researcher lesson evaluations strongly suggest that the use of an original text bypasses student concern over textual providence. Recognising the text as authentic and not filtered through secondary authors appears to allow for more time within the discussion that builds up to meaningful dialogue. Laura, for example, is reported to have confidence to explore the text as though it were the root of numerous different perspectives when she considers it an authentic, that is unaltered by a teacher, text, "...so a theist might think that this bit..." (Table 6).

The data from the class teacher interview also raises the issue of authenticity of the text labelling certain texts as "RE authentic" (Figure 5). This highlights the importance of students recognising the text as authentically useful for their studies in religious education, else they would find it difficult to engage with the text as an embodiment of the "*other* perspective" (Figure 5) in favour of discussions around the general 'purpose' of the text.

The data suggests, then, that *authentic* texts are an appropriate stimulus for improving dialogue in religious education. That is to say students must have confidence in the providence of the text, resulting in the students in this study appearing more confident to engage with original or direct texts rather than commentaries. Without this confidence much of the time dedicated to discussion could spent on a superficial interrogation of the context of the text with limited cognitive empathy with the text as an embodiment of the absent other as discussed in the literature review. However,

this data does not suggest that an engagement with a text necessitates meaningful dialogue involving cognitive empathy, but rather that the use of an authentic text can help direct students away from a focus on disputational talk with each other.

Crucially, this data does not suggest that a commentary style text is not objectively "RE authentic" (Figure 5) but rather does not compliment the prior learning of the students in this study. For students having had experience in exegesis, for example, a commentary style text could prove to be as authentic as the 'original' Gospel text was here.

Accessibility and scaffolding

A second common theme throughout the data collected for this research question is the importance of scaffolding to support the accessibility of the text. The interview with the class teacher clearly identifies the problems when using a single text for an entire, mixed-ability, class with regard to every student having equal access to it. As discussed in the findings for research question one, a student's ability to access a text is heavily dependent on their prior skills, both literacy skills and skills related to Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956).

The data for this research question, however, does not indicate a blanket inability for students without such necessary skills to access the text in a way that encourages meaningful dialogue. Rather, every student in the case study begins to show evidence of understanding the text as an embodiment of the absent other, albeit to varying degrees. For example Tom, a student with the lowest literacy levels in the group who consistently achieves levels three-four, shows evidence of some kind of intentional empathy with a different view not represented by a figure in the group dialogue, "so a scientist might think that..." (Appendix 2). While this is only a limited engagement with recognising the 'other', it is a significant improvement from the disputational dialogue Tom engaged with previously.

A major factor that assisted the transition in Tom's dialogue appears to be the introduction of differentiated talking points as a scaffold (an example of this appears in Appendix 5). The differentiated talking points were aimed at directing Tom's dialogue away from considering the 'actual' events of the text and using the text as a source for a 'correct' answer including points like, "Think about a scientist's job. A scientist would completely disagree with the message of this text" (Appendix 2).

As identified in the literature review, for a text to be a good stimulus for meaningful dialogue in religious education it must be recognised as an embodiment of an absent other than can be intentionally empathised with. The data presented here suggests that this is dependent on two factors: firstly the text must be identified by the students to be "RE authentic" (Figure 5) so they can confidently engage with it; secondly, the text must be made accessible to all students. A successful method of ensuring accessibility in this case study was the use of differentiated talking points aimed at directing dialogue away from 'actual' events towards a consideration of 'meaning'.

Research Question Three: What are the features of meaningful dialogue in religious education?
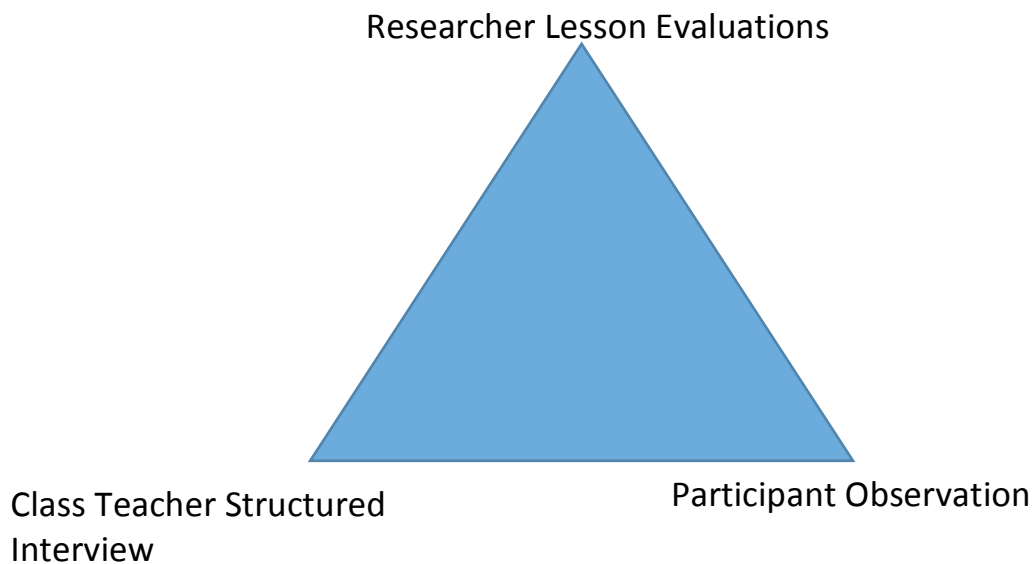
Researcher Lesson Evaluations

Class Teacher Structured
Interview

Participant Observation

Figure 3: Triangulation of Methods (RQ3)

Presentation of Data from Research Question Three

Researcher Lesson Evaluations Data

Figure 7 is an excerpt from the researcher lesson evaluation notes answering the question 'What appears to be the main features of meaningful dialogue in the students?'

Not all students have exhibited signs of either constructing meaning through dialogue or engaging in a kind of cognitive empathy. The students that begin to intentionally concern themselves with the position of the other tend to be students working at higher national curriculum levels.

Sometimes students appear to be able to construct a limited amount of meaning without cognitive empathy for the absent other. For example, Niamh was able to empathise with the views of others present in the dialogue and synthesise their views into a new understanding. However, she did not necessarily engage with the views of the absent other. Therefore, the meaning she constructed was not as developed as it could have been. It's worth noting that students often engaged in a 'vertical' style of cumulative dialogue that *appears* to be meaningful on the surface, but in actual fact makes no advances on agreement between each other's views with no consideration of the other.

Figure 4: Excerpt from researcher lesson evaluation RQ3

Participant Observation Data

For ease of presentation, I organised the data collected from the participant observation data that comments on student engagement in some form of empathetic understanding.

Tom (NCL 3-4)	Showed little sign of any empathetic understanding. His talk can be summarised as disputational.
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"I think you're right. But, if you think about it this way..." Evidence here of critical empathy with James resulting in knowledge synthesis.
James (NCL 5-6)	"No, I think you're close, but the text says... which means it's probably something to do with..."
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	She rarely engaged in any talk that exhibited signs of cognitive empathy.
Laura (NCL 7)	"So, maybe if we think what (other student not in case study) said then it looks like we might actually agree."

Table 7: Participant Observation Data RQ3

Class Teacher Structured Interview Data

Figure 8 is an excerpt from the structured interview with the class teacher answering the question 'What do you think meaningful dialogue sounds like in religious education?'

That's a big question. Given not everyone agrees what the purpose of religious education is, I guess this is more my own opinion. Most people I think agree that different perspectives is an important part of religious education. If we agree that this is the case, then meaningful discussion in RE would involve some kind of engagement with a different perspectives. But it would have to be critical, not just a recognition or even agreement with a different view without showing they have some kind of good understanding.

Figure 5: Excerpt from structured interview RQ3

Discussion of Data from Research Question Three

Literature viewed for this research paper identified meaningful dialogue involving two distinct features (see *Types of Dialogue*): creating a space in which meaning is constructed and; an intentional empathy for others.

The data collected in relation to this research question has identified three themes in relation to how meaningful dialogue sounds between the students in this case study.

Constructing meaning

Data collated from the researcher lesson evaluations suggest that most students were able to construct some kind of meaning through dialogue without showing signs of cognitive empathy (Figure 6). This is supported by the participant observation data (6) evidencing Lucy working cumulative towards the construction of meaning without engaging in cognitive empathy, however the meaning she can construct is limited. This supports Wegerif's (2011) concern, highlighted in the literature review, that cumulative talk is only able to provide a limited amount of space for the construction of meaning as it has a tendency to be horizontal in nature. That is to say that students simply work with each other's points, and move on once general consensus is found, rather than engaging critically with each other and an absent other.

The data collated from the interview with the class teacher suggests that if views of different perspectives, particularly those from "RE authentic" (Figure 5) texts, are not considered then it becomes difficult to match up the purpose of that dialogue with the purposes of religious education generally (Figure 7). A feature of meaningful dialogue, then, is not just a space where any kind of

meaning is constructed, but rather a space where meaning is constructed critically, resulting in a vertical shape of dialogue that engages with views of the absent other.

Empathy for present other

The data collected for this research question suggests that empathy is an important part of meaningful dialogue in religious education. According to this data, critical cognitive empathy can happen in two ways: with present others and with absent others. Empathy with present others that is used critically to assist in the construction of meaning occurs in a number of dialogues recorded in the participant observation, but is particularly apparent as a characterisation of Niamh's dialogue (Table 7). Niamh is recorded to have incorporated the views of James into her own understanding and used such views in the construction of a third viewpoint. This is clear evidence of meaningful dialogue without necessarily engaging with the views of an absent other.

This data makes the distinction between horizontal and vertical dialogue a little more difficult to draw. There is clear evidence of cognitive empathy and, as a result, knowledge construction in Niamh's dialogue without reference to the embodied absent other in the form of a text.

Empathy with absent other

Few students in this case study exhibit signs of complete cognitive empathy with present others and absent others in a way that enables them to construct meaning. While the majority of students certainly show signs of progress in recognising the text as an embodiment of the absent other, students still find it preferable to concentrate their dialogue on the views represented by those present in the dialogue.

This data suggests that the skill of cognitive empathy can be developed and potentially secured by students without the use of a text and therefore without consideration of the absent others. This raises the question as to whether critical cognitive empathy with the views of present others, and not absent others, both: meets the criteria for meaningful dialogue in religious education and; is a sufficient enough distinction between horizontal and vertical dialogue.

It is fair to say, then, that a feature of meaningful dialogue in religious education is a critical and intentionally empathetic engagement with the perspectives of another, either present or absent, that is incorporated and synthesised into a new understanding. Perhaps a more developed meaningful

dialogue would involve the views of both present and absent others, given the former type of meaningful dialogue does not have access to the infinite other a text potentially embodies. However, this data suggests that there is a midpoint on the scale between horizontal and vertical dialogue that hinges on the ability of the students to cognitively empathise with absent others as well as those present.

Conclusions

This research project was concerned with the way in which texts could be used to improve the quality of dialogue in religious education. Rooted in an overarching concern that there is little consensus as to what meaningful dialogue sounds like in religious education, this paper adapted Wegerif's view that it must involve a level of cognitive empathy with the absent other embodied in a text.

According to the data collected in this research project, it appears that texts do positively affect the quality of dialogic learning. When used with appropriate scaffolds to ensure students can access the text (in the case of this project, talking points) students' talk is effectively directed away from disputational talk toward considering the texts as an embodiment of an 'other' view. However, the use of texts does not guarantee meaningful dialogue immediately: the data from this research project suggests that students' ability to engage in meaningful dialogue in religious education is dependent on the previous skills they have acquired and therefore amount of scaffolding needed.

This research project, then, supports the distinction made by between horizontal and vertical styles of talk by identifying a 'mid-point' between students cognitively empathising with present others and absent others, suggesting that experiencing *how* to engage in meaningful dialogue is a process of skill development.

It is important to recognise the limitations of this study, and the resulting trustworthiness of the findings discussed above. This research project is significantly limited by its sample, both in terms of diversity and size. The small sample only reflected the ethnic background and NCLs exhibited in the participating school, and not nationally. Therefore, the findings for this research project are most trustworthy when used to inform the teaching of the particular participants involved: drawing conclusions about the successfulness of dialogic learning techniques in other situations, with other pupils, would be inappropriate.

However, this research project has the potential to be developed into a study with wider reaching conclusions. Options for development include: increasing the sample size; repeating the study in different school settings and; comparing the collected data. In so doing, such a research project would be able to investigate further variables which affect student engagement with texts in dialogic learning techniques.

Despite such limitations, this research has been beneficial to my practice as a training teacher in religious education. I am now able to take what I have researched into the classroom, particularly how to appropriately select and scaffold texts in a way that lends themselves to promoting more meaningful, vertical, dialogue. Considering the limitations of the research methodology of this project, I would be interested in investigating the process of skill development in relation to dialogic learning: how can a student *practice* cognitive empathy? If cognitive empathy is a skill, how can a teacher *teach* it? How can a student *learn* to *do it*?

To conclude, this research project indicates that texts can be used to direct student dialogue away from superficial disputational style talk. Despite encouraging students to recognise that there are other views to engage with, critically, the short-term affect of the introduction of texts encourage students to look for difference among those present in the dialogue. Encouraging a genuine critical engagement with the views of an absent other, through cognitive empathy with a text, is perhaps a longer process of skill development.

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Appendix 1

Notes from the participant observation.

Before the introduction of a direct text	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"... found it difficult to understand what was being asked of him: "I don't get it"" "...engaging in lots of off topic conversation" "Showed little sign of any empathetic understanding. His talk can be summarised as disputational."
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"Doesn't seem to want to chat, but is being encouraged to do so by surrounding people" "Although eager to talk about something, Niamh still doesn't really know what she should be talking about"
James (NCL 5-6)	"... would like to participate but is only doing so superficially, agreeing with what has already been discussed"
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"... recognises that there is a set of right answer, and just repeats them without giving much away as to her thought processes"
Laura (NCL 7)	"Engaging in good discussion, taking into account the views of different people" "Seems happy to listen to others, and if she disagrees she does so while being encouraging to the students around her."
Once the direct text had been introduced	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"Tom is very focused on the 'actual' events, as if trying to prove something did or didn't 'actually' happen" "...continues with chat that is not about the text or related to the lesson"
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"..appears to be pretty guided by Tom, and not really engaging with the text in a meaningful way- quite superficial"
James (NCL 5-6)	"... dialogue is more meaningful in that he is quite set on trying to find evidence for his views."
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"sorts the text quite quickly into sections that could evidence her initial thoughts" "Still can't seem to move on from the 'actual' events" "Seems concerned as to the author of the text [commentary on Gospel of Mark] and spends some time trying to prove it wrong with her knowledge of the actual text of the Gospel" Lucy's talk can be summarised as cumulative. She works with others to construct a limited amount of meaning. She rarely engaged in any talk that exhibited signs of cognitive empathy.

	Note: This is the last data recorded on Lucy.
Laura (NCL 7)	"... continues to talk about the view point of others... this time using evidence and examples from the text to support her..."
Introduction of talking points	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"seems more interested in trying to understand the talking points rather than making any reference to the text"
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"... started to also engage with the talking points using the texts, although still quite superficial"
James (NCL 5-6)	"has now understood the point of looking at a text and is linking up bits of it that seems relevant to each talking point"
Laura (NCL 7)	"appears to enjoy the challenge of looking at things from a view she hadn't thought of herself"
Introduction of differentiated talking points	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"Shows signs of beginning to try to see something from another perspective: "Okay, so someone who believes in God would think that this obviously happened""
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"Now seems to be more able to discuss her own thoughts, because Tom better understands the talking points." "I think you're right. But, if you think about it this way..." Niamh successfully incorporates James' view, which is different to hers, to produce a third understanding. Evidence here of critical empathy with James resulting in knowledge synthesis.
James (NCL 5-6)	"Continues talk with little difference"
Laura (NCL 7)	"Doesn't really seem to affect her discussion quality" "Another religious person, like, from a different religion, might think..."

Appendix 2

Notes from the researcher lesson evaluations.

Before the introduction of a direct text	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"I don't understand" "I don't get it" "What are we talking about" [Off topic chat]
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"I think you're right." "No, maybe it is more what he said before." "What's an allegory?" [Off topic chat]
James (NCL 5-6)	"I think I agree with you" "What she said"
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"Yeah, I think it's more about an allegory."
Laura (NCL 7)	"Well it depends who you're talking to. A theist might think it's an allegory but an atheist would just think it's all made up. Probably."
Once the direct text had been introduced	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"Well this is just silly. I can't actually happen. Can it?" "No. It's all made up." [Off topic chat]
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"Probably not actually true. A nice story though."
James (NCL 5-6)	"Yeah, so here it says ... that probably means ..." "It says it right here"
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"Can this happen? Why do people believe this?" "Yeah, look right here. This bit could mean..."
Laura (NCL 7)	"Okay, so a theist would probably interpret this bit as being about God, you know, how powerful he is and stuff" "Oh, so maybe it actually means this..."
Introduction of talking points	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"So, a theist, is that right?, would think that this is all true?" "I'm not sure. What has a scientist got to do with it?"
Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"So a theist would think this bit is true, like, happened."
James (NCL 5-6)	"This bit, then, is a bit like how an agnostic would respond, but like, more"
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"Do you really think so? I'm not so sure. Like, wouldn't a scientist be more interested in..."
Laura (NCL 7)	"A doctor would probably ... because"
Introduction of differentiated talking points	
Tom (NCL 3-4)	"So a scientist might have a problem because his job is to, like, prove things. And this obviously didn't happen."

Niamh (NCL 3-4)	"This bit here might be hard for a doctor to believe."
James (NCL 5-6)	"So, a doctor would probably look for another answer for this. You know, like maybe he wasn't actually fully blind." "No, I think you're close, but the text says... which means it's probably something to do with..."
Lucy (NCL 5-6)	"It's actually quite different. I thought they might just think..."
Laura (NCL 7)	"Another religious person, like, from a different religion, might think..."

Appendix 3

Notes from structured interview with class teacher.

On reflection at lesson four, what seems to be the main features of meaningful dialogue?

Not all students have exhibited signs of either constructing meaning through dialogue or engaging in a kind of cognitive empathy. The students that begin to intentionally concern themselves with the position of the other tend to be students working at higher national curriculum levels.

Sometimes students appear to be able to construct a limited amount of meaning without cognitive empathy for the absent other. For example, Niamh was able to empathise with the views of others present in the dialogue and synthesise their views into a new understanding. However, she did not necessarily engage with the views of the absent other. Therefore, the meaning she constructed was not as developed as it could have been.

It's worth noting that students often engaged in a 'vertical' style of cumulative dialogue that *appears* to be meaningful on the surface, but in actual fact makes no advances on agreement between each other's views with no consideration of the other.

Appendix 4

Name: Class:

_____

Please complete this questionnaire about discussion work as best as you can. It will help me with some research I am doing about the way we learn. Please put your name on the top so I can make sure you have completed the questionnaire. Once I have done that, I will remove your name from the sheet.

Q1. (Please circle ONE answer)

Do you enjoy discussion work in class?

Q2. (Please circle ONE answer)

What do you think the most important reason for discussion work is?

1) There is no benefit.

2) I can ask for help if I don't understand.

Q3. (Please circle ONE answer)

Why might a teacher ask you to discuss a text you have read in a religious education lesson?

1) To challenge each other's answers.

2) To look for the right answer together.

3) To look at something from a different perspective.

Q4. (Please circle ONE answer)

Why are texts important in RE?

 1) They help us find evidence for answers.

2) They help us find out something new. 3) They are not important.

Appendix 5

Examples of texts with talking points.

John 6
New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

6 Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), [2] and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. [3] Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. [4] The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

[5] When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" [6] He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

[7] Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages[a] to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

[8] Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, [9] "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

[10] Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). [11] Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

[12] When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." [13] So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

[14] After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." [15] Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

Jesus Walks on the Water

[16] When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, [17] where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. [18] A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. [19] When they had rowed about three or four miles,[b] they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened. [20] But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." [21] Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

[22] The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away

alone. [23] Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. [24] Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus.

<u>Examples of talking points used</u>
1) A scientist would think this never happened.
2) God obviously exists.
3) A theist would be convinced by this miracle.
4) Jesus was the ancient Dynamo.
5) This is not a miracle.
6) Jesus is the Son of God.
7) Jesus is a prophet.
8) This is an allegory.