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# Walking the Talk: moving forwards with sustained shared thinking and dialogic teaching

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**ABSTRACT** Dialogic teaching has enormous potential to harness the power of talk in developing children's thinking but is sometimes challenging to enact within today's policy context. Similarly, sustained shared thinking is an established and powerful practice with children in the early years but faces pressure within today's educational climate. Though closely related, the two have been addressed largely separately until now. The authors argue for drawing dialogic teaching and sustained shared thinking together more explicitly by reviewing how they are similar yet distinctive, and by offering a continuum model for practice, throughout school, which takes a dialogic stance. They suggest that this more holistic approach may empower teachers to utilise these powerful forms of pedagogy. Establishing a continuum within which sustained shared thinking and the many pedagogies of dialogic teaching align may strengthen both perspectives in the face of outside pressures and help to clarify the position of productive dialogue throughout the curriculum.

## The Case for Coherence

In this article, we consider a new way of positioning talk and, more specifically, dialogue within the classroom. This interest is typically associated with a social-constructivist view of learning, partly inspired by Vygotsky's (1986) insights into the dual role of speech as both a medium of communication and an internal mode of thinking. Vygotsky's argument for supporting learners beyond their personal capabilities through interaction with a more knowledgeable other has been taken up through the subsequent development of concepts such as scaffolding (Bruner, 1978), guided participation (Rogoff, 1990) and interthinking (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). The promotion of spoken language in schools has sometimes been framed more broadly – not simply as a tool for

learning, but also as a skill in its own right – under the heading of oracy (Wilkinson, 1965). These ideas are also associated with the broader principle of dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2017), which seeks to characterise a type of classroom ethos conducive to dialogue and other forms of purposeful talk. Classroom dialogue in these varied forms has been extensively researched, particularly over the past four decades (for a research summary, see Howe & Abedin, 2013). The positive but mainly small-scale studies of the past are gradually being supplemented by larger bodies of research (for example, Education Endowment Foundation, 2017) confirming the potential of dialogic approaches to support learner participation, reasoning and attainment.

Despite this impressive pedigree and an All Party Parliamentary Group due to report on oracy in 2020 (Oracy All Party Parliamentary Group, 2019), dialogue has often been marginalised in England – directly or indirectly – in curricula and other policy turns. For example, recent governments have vocally championed a ‘knowledge-based’ curriculum, associating this at times with forms of pedagogy involving carefully sequenced instruction (Gibb, 2017). Related to this, the growth of interest in memorisation of knowledge has also received official validation in ministers’ speeches (Gibb, 2018) and in the latest school inspection framework, which equates learning with a change in long-term memory (Ofsted, 2019a, b). More specifically, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills’ (Ofsted, 2017) *Bold Beginnings* report on early years practice appears to privilege direct teaching and ‘readiness’ for the assumed formality of subsequent years, portraying a very limited view of play and a distinct absence of a focus on purposeful interaction. In principle, none of this necessarily precludes the skilled use of talk-based pedagogies, but teachers might be forgiven for feeling that such approaches involve bravely swimming against the prevailing tide.

Against this challenging backdrop, we seek to build on two previous *Forum* articles. In the ‘Improving on Silence’ issue, Kessler-Singh and Robertson (2016) issue a call to action in pursuit of a ‘pedagogy of discourse’, bringing together under a single banner a variety of talk initiatives. This view has encouraged us to look more holistically at what might otherwise seem to be disparate activities. More recently, Jarvis (2018) highlighted the importance of sustained shared thinking (SST), a particular form of dialogue-based practice in the early years, expressing concern at its omission from four key Ofsted documents, including *Bold Beginnings*. We are keen to develop this thinking with a counter-narrative that goes beyond early years education. Our argument, therefore, is that positioning SST and dialogic teaching even more explicitly as part of the same continuum offers reciprocal benefits and the opportunity to view classroom dialogue as a coherent, whole-school approach. Our perspective comes from the early years and primary phases, but the broader points made are relevant for all age groups. We begin by exploring the nature of both dialogic teaching and SST before drawing some comparisons.

## Dialogic Teaching

Dialogic teaching, while chiefly associated with the work of Robin Alexander (2017), is a broad concept overlapping with other models, including accountable talk (Michaels et al, 2008) and exploratory talk (Mercer & Dawes, 2008). These ideas have a common commitment to a classroom ethos based on collective meaning-making through the consideration of diverse perspectives. Dialogic teaching in its many forms represents, therefore, a form of pedagogy but first and foremost a value system rooted in pupil participation in a community of learners.

While Alexander (2018) is clear that dialogic teaching is to be understood holistically, based on learning that is collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful, it is nevertheless often associated with certain forms of classroom discussion and dialogue. For example, Reznitskaya and Gregory (2013) identify features of talk, including teachers asking open-ended questions, pupils building on others' ideas in lengthy, reasoned contributions, and teachers' responses prompting elaboration and further enquiry, while Nystrand et al (2003) emphasise the incorporation of a teacher's initial provocative stimulus. While all of this suggests a highly interactive classroom, geared towards a process of joint enquiry by teacher and students, it has been suggested that dialogic teaching is less about specific repertoires of talk than about establishing a dialogic *stance*. Scott and Mortimer (2006) give examples of teacher shifts between interactive and non-interactive modes that nevertheless retain a dialogic quality, while Boyd and Markarian (2011) show how an authentic consideration of pupil ideas may still allow for some didactic treatment of content.

The impact of dialogic teaching has been seen in two main forms. In analyses of classroom interaction, researchers in a range of countries have often noted improvements in the quality of pupil talk as a result of dialogic interventions with teachers (for example, Alexander, 2004; Veen et al, 2017). Other studies have gone beyond an intrinsic interest in talk itself to examine the transferable impact on attainment. Large-scale evaluations of dialogic forms of teaching have been fairly scarce to date. However, promising evidence has been found of a correlation with positive impacts on attainment in tests of mathematics and English (for example, Applebee et al, 2003; Howe et al, 2019) – a suggestion reinforced by the Education Endowment Foundation's (2017) randomised control trial, which reported some additional progress in these subjects, as well as science.

## Sustained Shared Thinking

The practice of SST has an important place within the development of contemporary early years practice (for an overview, see Jarvis, 2018). As such, there is a philosophical as well as empirical rationale for SST in educational practice with young children. The term 'sustained shared thinking' was first introduced in the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY)

research, where it was defined as: ‘An episode in which two or more individuals “work together” in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc.’ (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002, p. 8). SST is therefore an effective pedagogic interaction in which thinking is co-developed, but it is less an *activity* and more a *quality* of interaction. The focus is intentionally on ‘thinking’ more than language, which is sustained for depth. Talk is important within SST but, more holistically, it is *communication* that supports and extends thinking. Through sustained communication, there is a move from lower-order to higher-order thinking (Meade et al, 2013), which often develops to metacognitive thinking (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2008). SST is often combined with adult modelling and open-ended questioning within effective early years practice.

The timing of episodes of SST is partially opportunistic, dependent on interest and opportunity. Subsequently, SST is more commonly associated with children’s play where adults are able to play alongside children, taking opportunities to engage in SST as they arise (Meade et al, 2013). Movement into and out of periods of SST can therefore be quite fluid. SST interactions are typically (but not exclusively) between adults and children, but it is essential that all parties contribute to the thinking (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2008). Power is shared (Olusoga, 2009) within this reciprocity of interaction around an authentic shared interest. SST is therefore an episode of interaction that is genuine, freely entered into and democratically framed.

SST has gained much traction within the early years education community, featuring in research studies and practical guides, although some confusion exists over what constitutes SST and how to achieve it (Purdon, 2016). The popularity of SST potentially derives from how well it aligns with and draws together many elements of what we know about effective early years practice, as Jarvis (2018) suggests. Whilst it is perhaps too strong to state that SST is ‘the practice most predictive of children’s progress’ according to research (Sylva & Taylor, 2006, p. 172), it is widely accepted that high-quality interactions which support and extend children’s thinking are an important feature of good early years practice (Howard et al, 2018).

### **The Challenges of Dialogic Pedagogies**

While there is, therefore, a convincing case for dialogic pedagogies, whether in the form of dialogic teaching or SST, this is a challenging form of pedagogy to enact. The policy directions mentioned previously are part of a broader culture of standardisation, measurement and competition, epitomised by high-stakes testing and accountability. The focus on a narrow range of measurable, frequently knowledge-based outcomes aligned with international comparison is unlikely to encourage the deeper, often less didactic forms of practice associated with making space for high-quality interaction and pupil talk. Snell and Lefstein (2018) point to challenges for teachers implementing dialogic teaching, which include a lack of time in a crowded curriculum and the necessary culture shift in

terms of knowledge, authority and learning. In addition to these issues, Kessler-Singh and Robertson (2016) discuss other fears, such as a scepticism towards theory, demands placed on teacher subject knowledge and the difficulty of relinquishing control of the classroom. In the early years, this is compounded by additional challenges of sufficient time and staffing ratios (Purdon, 2016). With these perceived obstacles in mind, we next compare and contrast dialogic teaching and SST as a first step in exploring the potential for aligned use across the 3-11 age range.

### **Bringing Together Sustained Shared Thinking and Dialogic Teaching**

Whilst SST has many overlaps with dialogic teaching, they differ in several distinct ways. Just by virtue of the age phases within which the approaches have been developed, SST more commonly occurs one-to-one or in small groups, whereas dialogic teaching tends to include these smaller interactions but also much larger group and whole-class dialogic contexts. Dialogic teaching is also broader in scope in that it incorporates the wider educational approach taken, including the dialogic environment, questioning pedagogies and provision for everyday talk (Alexander, 2018). SST, on the other hand, is specifically the dialogic interaction between individuals that produces shared thinking. In this sense, SST is a more specific term, associated with the impact or thinking created, rather than the practice itself. Whilst the environment is important in providing the conditions conducive to SST, it is not a feature of SST itself. Dialogic teaching is typically more structured and more planned for (by the adult) than SST, which tends to be viewed by practitioners as more opportunistic (Olusoga, 2009), and involves observation to determine when, how and, indeed, whether to invite engagement into SST. Within SST, there is an explicit emphasis on listening, and practitioner listening in particular (Purdon, 2016), although this features in dialogic teaching also, particularly for pupils (Alexander, 2018). The focus on verbal communication is considerable within dialogic teaching, whereas there is greater emphasis on holistic communication in SST – although talk is a key element within SST, it more commonly involves non-verbal communication. Both are similar in their emphasis on thinking and on dialogue (or interaction) for learning and teaching purposes.

From our brief overview of dialogic teaching and SST, it is clear that there is much overlap and commonality between the two. Both are rooted in dialogue and, indeed, the term ‘sustained shared thinking’ was coined in research in which observation data initially coded as ‘dialogue’ was reclassified as SST (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2008). Fundamentally, however, it may be the commitment to a dialogic *stance* that most unites these two ideas with the understanding that to learn is to build consensus of understanding. Therefore, learning spaces, within a dialogic stance, are places where differing ideas and interpretations are jointly considered. There is an openness to multiple

perspectives and new understanding is negotiated (rather than received). Such a stance positions the learner as a competent agent, as a collaborator who is active within the learning process. Shared values that acknowledge the value of discussion and communication are developed and enacted. Fundamentally, every individual is valued and respected. The possibilities and potential of these practices are significant, and it is from this standpoint that the dialogic-practice continuum provides a tentative model to unite SST and dialogic teaching, and further the cause of dialogic practice.

### **Towards a Coherent Approach: the dialogic-practice continuum**

In summary, our interpretation of a dialogic stance is characterised by a sustained commitment to communicating multiple perspectives as the means for shared construction of learning. Within this dialogic stance, teachers utilise practices which are broadly dialogic in nature but vary significantly across different contexts and for different purposes.

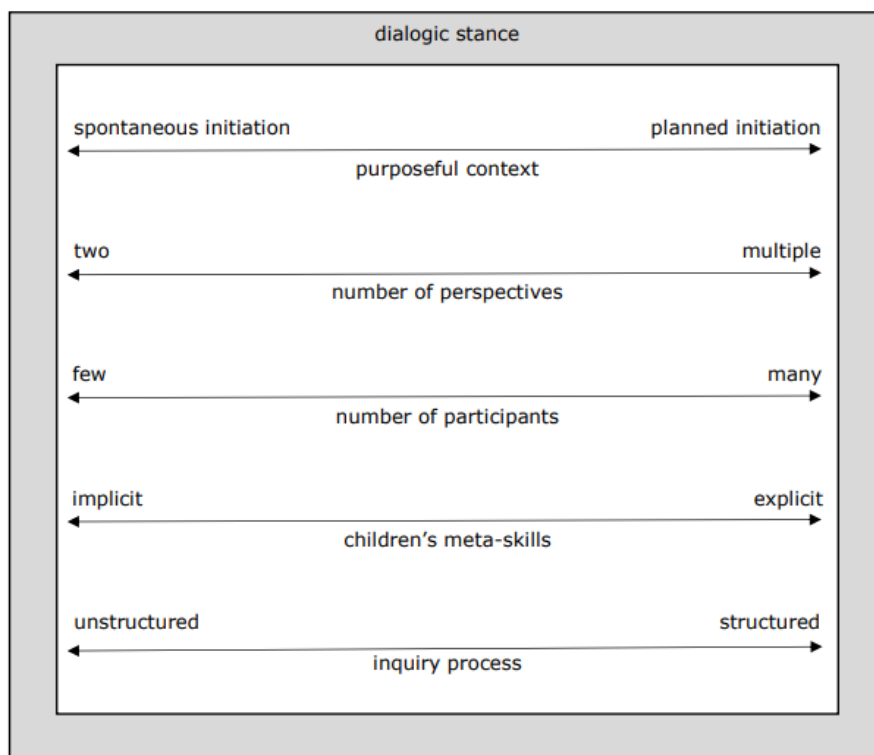


Figure 1. A dialogic-practice continuum.

We therefore offer a model of dialogic practice viewed as a continuum (Figure 1). Within an overall dialogic stance, this model features five dimensions of interaction: context, perspectives, participants, meta-skills and inquiry. Each demonstrates the breadth of possibility for dialogic practice so that any classroom activity might be located in different positions for each dimension. Both dialogic teaching and SST fit within the model, and it is possible to use both at all age phases, despite them being more prevalent in primary and early years practice, respectively.

To take two examples, within SST, a child and teacher may engage in spontaneous dialogue in which they ponder and explore a shared interest, thinking together through a sustained but unstructured inquiry process. The child's meta-skills might be developing in response to skilful teacher questioning without the child being consciously aware of their development. In this scenario, all dimensions of interaction are towards the left of the continuum. This type of SST could occur with older or younger children, but is significantly more common in early years practice. Alternatively, a planned-for class discussion in a science lesson, involving many individual viewpoints and asking children to reflect on the quality of their own reasoning, is more towards the right of the continuum in many respects, but may retain elements of unstructured inquiry (more towards the left).

Using the continuum model, practices are not age-specific or age-dependent but aligned to the learning situation. Indeed, some sections of the continuum may be used far less frequently, or not at all, in some classes, age ranges or subjects. One would expect a typical gradual shift from left to right in the balance of the five dimensions as a curriculum progresses and education contexts change, but this is dynamic and determined at the school level.

### **Conclusion**

Both SST and dialogic teaching are well-researched forms of pedagogy with strong evidence of impact and increased relevance for the renewed interest in oracy. Both approaches, however, are under threat from two main quarters. One is the perception from some teachers that these are challenging forms of pedagogy to implement; the other – closely related – is the performative pressure of curriculum coverage, testing and 'readiness' for subsequent phases of education. Our argument in this article has been that there are reciprocal benefits for both SST and dialogic teaching by seeing them more explicitly as part of the same continuum; our tentative model offers one way of conceptualising this. One such benefit is the opportunity to see SST not only as an effective practice with younger children, but also as the start of a longer, significant journey of self-expression. Another is the potential for schools to implement dialogue in a coherent and progressive manner, creating the all-important ethos that underpins successful dialogic practice. The continuum model presented here may serve as a reference point and object of discussion when considering this at the whole-school level. More than this, however, we

hope that this reframing of classroom dialogue represents a dual process of reclaiming. In the face of policy that often prescribes and directs the knowledge conveyed from teacher to learner, we are reclaiming the right for pupils to be legitimate participants in learning. In the face of policy that selectively and ideologically marginalises certain forms of evidence-informed pedagogy, we are reclaiming teachers' professional autonomy and judgement over their practice, allowing them to 'walk the talk'.

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