# Dialogic skills for religious education

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**Abstract**
In the field of religious education, pedagogies have featured regularly as teachers strive for the most effective methodology to promote pupils' learning but their current success rate has been called into question by two critical Subject Reports in 2010 and 2013 from the English Government's Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED). This paper reports on a piece of action research that sets Bloom's taxonomy within a framework of classroom dialogue skills with the intention of addressing the OfSTED-identified shortcomings. Furthermore, the paper proposes that in a world where young people often hear and see a close relationship between religion and conflict, religious education cannot remain silent and the skills for enhancing dialogue in the classroom may also have a contribution to make to issues around religion, conflict and education.

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## Introduction

This paper presents a case study of action research that was undertaken in response to two factors; the UK Government's Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) Religious Education Report, 2013, and a positional and philosophical paper on dialogue skills for religious education (Castelli, 2012). The 2013 OfSTED report identified continued failings in the teaching of religious education that had previously been reported in their 2010 Subject Report and noted that that there had been little significant progress in teaching and learning despite their previous recommendations. The philosophical and positional paper in question proposed the teaching of dialogue skills as a pedagogy for enhancing learning and under-

standing in religion and belief. The action research at the heart of this article was an attempt to test the validity of the claim that teaching dialogue skills can enhance pupils' religious literacy. The paper will go on to explore how the development of dialogue in the religious education classroom can help realise some of the potential for the subject that the OfSTED report found absent in many classrooms. The argument presented will demonstrate how such an approach can aid both the understanding of another's beliefs and practices and also help pupils develop a growing articulation of their own. The paper will propose that the teaching and learning of dialogue skills in the classroom can also help pupils find ways of facing difference and challenge without recourse to aggression or violence.

## The Case Study

The OfSTED Report *Realising the Potential* (2013, 5), painted a picture of a religious education in England where "achievement and teaching in 91 secondary schools visited were only good or better in just under half of the schools". This picture was little changed since the previous report in 2010 of another 90 schools and raised serious concerns about the quality of pupils' learning and progress for anyone who believes religious education has a contribution to make to pupils' understanding of themselves and the contemporary world. The report goes on to state that:

> A key factor preventing RE from realising its potential was the tension between, on the one hand, the academic goal of extending and deepening pupils' ability to make sense of religion and belief, and on the other hand, the wider goal of contributing towards overall personal development. Teachers will struggle to plan and teach the subject effectively while this tension remains unresolved. (OfSTED, 2013, 23)

This reported poor state of much of religious education teaching in England raised the research question that forms the case study at the heart of this article. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's (QCA) Religious Education group claimed that "Religious Education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human" (QCA, 2007, p. 2). Could the disjuncture between this vision of the subject and the reality in many English schools be addressed if pupils were taught skills that engage with *challenging questions* in a manner that helped them *make sense of religion and belief* and make a contribution to pupils' *overall development*?

## Methodology

Wragg (1994, p. 111) distinguishes between two kinds of action research, which he calls 'rational-reactive' and 'intuitive proactive'. In the first, the researcher examines what is occurring, in a classroom for example, "usually with a specific focus on something known to be a problem or in need of improvement, and then draws up a programme to react to what has been discovered" (ibid). The second type of action research is undertaken by practitioners who know, "or think they know, what needs to be done, and so implement an intervention programme first and then visit classrooms to see how well it is progressing" (ibid). The framework for the research in this project was an 'intuitive proactive' action research project whose design was not only an attempt to implement the pedagogical theory proposed by Castelli (2012) but was also a response to the OfSTED Religious Education Reports of 2010 and 2013.

> Criteria specific to action research emphasises clear identification of a problem, control of research bias, collaboration with others, systematic planning and data collection, documentation of processes and outcomes in the study and triangulation of multiple source data. (Ludovico et al, 2010, p. 358)

The sequencing of identifying the problem, naming and controlling the bias and making best use of all possibilities for collaboration encapsulate the unfolding of this case study.

The *problem* for religious education in many English schools is apparent even in the minimum references from the 2013 OfSTED report quoted above. The problem for English religious education was not so much that insufficient numbers of lessons inspected failed to achieve OfSTED standards of *Good* or *Outstanding*, but that such poor teaching and learning was a disservice to so many pupils. The challenge in any intuitive proactive response (Wragg, 1994, p. 111) was how to ensure that the planning and teaching of religious education could develop a relevant and engaging learning. The hypothesis was that teaching belief dialogue skills could achieve this and the proposed action research would test this.

The issue of bias in the research arose in several areas; firstly, in the selection of the school and the teacher who collaborated in the research and in the use of a dialogue pedagogy devised by the researcher. Establishing the validity of the research question, the focus, the methodology, the gathering and analysis of data would each in their own way address the issue of bias. Not to obviate its presence, as this would be both impossible and undesirable, because, as Hammersley & Atkinson (1995) argue, without a real school, a real teacher and a real researcher, no

real world classroom can evolve from the gathered data. Awareness of the bias is indispensable but,

> By including our own role within the research focus and perhaps even systematically exploiting our participation in the settings under study as researchers, we can produce accounts of the social worlds and justify them without paying reliance on futile appeals to empiricism, of either positivist or naturalist varieties. (ibid, p. 21)

It was felt that the identification of any personal and professional bias in the relationships of participating parties would be counter balanced by an understanding, identification and analysis of any evidence of pupils' developing religious education literacy in the data gathered.

Education research is of its nature collaborative not only because education itself is a collaborative undertaking but also, as in this case study, bringing the research theory into the classroom needed both the pupils' and the teacher's cooperation. In fact, this collaboration was a further means of testing the validity of the collection and analysis of the data and of ensuring that the account was a 'real world' account of the pupils and their classroom. "Establishing validity is to do with showing the authenticity of the evidence base, explaining the standards of judgements used, and demonstrating the reasonableness of the claim" (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006, p. 98).

Pupil questionnaires and teacher interviews were the research tools used to gather and interpret the data generated by the research. The questionnaires were not only an efficient means of gathering data from every pupil in the class but allowed the researcher to return to the data to ensure as much information as possible had been gleaned and, further, ensure any analysis and interpretation of the pupil voice could be validated. The interviews with the class teacher proved invaluable in contextualising this pupil data and in justifying any interpretation.

> They (the interview) are a very flexible research tool which can be used to gather a range of different types of information, including factual data, views and opinions, personal narratives and histories, which make them useful as a means of answering a wide range of research questions. The opportunity for dialogue which they provide allows the interviewer to probe and clarify and to check that they have understood correctly what is being said. (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, p. 85)

There were three interviews with the teacher. The first took place prior to the teaching of the topic to establish a shared understanding of the focus and procedures of the research, the second, after an initial analysis of the questionnaires, to

validate preliminary analysis of the data drawn out of the pupils' answers and finally as a further check on the validity of the conclusions being drawn from the data. As noted by Atkins & Wallace above, these interviews allowed the researcher to gather a range of different types of information that painted a rich picture of the pupils, their classroom, their school and some insight into their families and their wider community, as well as an opportunity to check the ongoing analysis and interpretation.

## The Players and the Context

The unfolding choice of the players and the context within the action research was as follows: the teacher, the school, the class and finally the subject topic. The class teacher was an *'outstanding'* teacher of religious education both when training to be a teacher with the researcher as his tutor and subsequently in reported OfSTED observations. The teacher had also expressed an interest in collaboration in any research that involved the development of the religious education dialogue skills proposed in the published positional paper (Castelli, 2012). Although the school selected itself once the teacher had volunteered, it had a particular ethnography that would enhance the research project due to its ethnic and religious make-up. The school is a mixed sex, comprehensive school in south east London of pupils aged 11-18 years. There are 880 pupils on roll largely from Black Caribbean, Black African and Portuguese backgrounds whose religious adherences are mainly Muslim and Christian with some students who profess to be atheists. 95% of the pupils are entitled to a daily free school meal which is an accepted indicator of pupils from families who are economically disadvantaged. Religious Education is taken seriously in the school with an A* - C pass rate at GCSE of 84%. The combination of the serious status of religion within the pupils' family backgrounds, the credibility of religious education as a subject in the school and the Muslim-Christian make-up of the school population gave the development of dialogue skills a real and vibrant context. The teacher chose a Year 8 Class as the focus of the research, 32 pupils aged 12-13 years. He chose this class as he was not only their religious education teacher but also their form tutor, that is, he not only saw them for their weekly lesson but had met them twice each day in their form base for the previous nine months. Consequently, he knew them well, and they him. The teacher was of Black Caribbean heritage with a first degree and masters in theology and religious studies. During subsequent interviews his position and status were discussed and it was agreed that his heritage was a factor in his status in the school but not as much as his effectiveness as a teacher and only the latter

was relevant to the research. The teacher chose his form group because of the strength of the relationship with them and the trust they had in him and each other which he rightly believed would be conducive to the pupils responding at some depth to the questions asked of them. The religious education topic at the centre of the research project was 'Places of Worship' and, in particular, a planned visit to the local Anglican church and a meeting with a member of that community during the visit. This topic would afford opportunities for dialogue between a range of different Christian and Muslim beliefs within the class and between the pupils and the attendant Anglican representative during the visit. In the critical assessment of the teacher, the school, the class and the topic as a context for this research project, it was felt that there was sufficient validity to the context to justify an action research project which could address the problems raised by the OfSTED report and test the pedagogical hypothesis proposed in the positional paper.

## A Dialogic Pedagogy

The proposed pedagogy comprised five skills; *imagination, articulation, seriousness, humility and hesitation*. The origin and design of these skills is discussed in full in the original publication (Castelli, 2012, pp. 213-214) and is presented in outline here to explain the focus and working of the action research project.

When presenting the history of the development of Christian doctrine, John Henry Newman (Newman, 1845, pp. 39-40; Cornwell, 2010, p. 86) found a key role for *imagination*. He believed that faith (belief) as an imaginative process is awakened and shaped by the images, symbols, rituals and conceptual representations of religion. Similarly, to articulate belief the pupil needs to be conversant with image, symbol, ritual and representation and use sufficient imagination to recognise their meaning for another and their potential in articulating their own belief. Ricoeur (1992, p. 114) argues:

> Self-understanding is an interpretation ; interpretation of the self in turn finds in the narrative, among other subjects and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with novelistic style of imaginary autobiographies.

Teaching pupils how to develop and use their imagination through an engagement with text, symbol, people or place exercises those higher order thinking skills Bloom (1956) identified in his taxonomy.

The ability to *articulate* what has been learned, and what questions arise from the learning, needs the language and skills to communicate with clarity and sensitivity. Gates (2007, p. 18) argues that this is teaching pupils how to be literate in religion and belief.

> The inter-subjective checks on the internal coherence of faith are as important to a religious tradition as to any group of natural scientists… From an educational point of view, the opportunity to check these credentials against personal experience is a very proper activity…to distinguish between encouraging children to become religious and enabling them to discover for themselves what it might mean to be a believer or an atheist – enabling them to become 'religiate', to coin a term.

The ability to articulate one's own belief, and to learn how to dialogue with the belief of another, is a *serious* business because it touches on each other's meaning-making which is itself a serious undertaking and at the heart of religious education.

> The point though is that to put somebody in touch with what is most serious in them, and for them, is a crucial aspiration and that is why Religious Education is not marginal, a Cinderella interest in education overall. (Williams, 2005)

Belief dialogue calls for *humility* because each participant comes to the other's and her own belief recognising that the ownership of truth is contested and partial and that claiming a monopoly of truth makes dialogue redundant. *Hesitation* is a learned skill in belief dialogue that reflects an appreciation that belief development and belief formation is a life-long process and therefore perceptions and impressions are always partial and frequently contingent.

> I think it is about the habit of not rushing to judgement. I think that's a profoundly spiritual issue. What is it that educates in the habit of not rushing to judgement? Whether judgement of a person, or judgement about a situation? What is it that instils in us the necessary inner quiet that means we act rather than react? And somewhere in there is the very heart of the moral as well as the spiritual dimension. (Williams, 2005)

Teaching the skills of humility and hesitation as tools for dialogue has a twofold influence on pupils' learning. It asks of them sensitivity as they approach the other but also helps them to think how prepared their own position is to be receptive to these same responses. If someone is approaching my beliefs with humility and hesitation is there something there that warrants these responses?

Unlike Bloom's (1956) taxonomy there is neither a hierarchy of value within these dialogue skills nor a linear sequencing of development but, similar to his taxonomy, they demand higher order thinking in the use of Bloom's skills of understanding, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These dialogue skills are cyclical and the learning and teaching process may be entered at any point within the cycle determined by the focus of the study, the learning outcome of the teaching plan and the learning needs of the pupils. Dialogue is at the heart of this educational enterprise and each of these skills plays its own role in developing pupils' ability to dialogue. Robyn Alexander (2006, p. 5) argues that dialogue in the classroom requires a willingness and skill to engage with minds, ideas and ways of thinking; the ability to question, listen, reflect, reason, explain, speculate and explore ideas; to form hypotheses and develop solutions to problems raised; to examine evidence, defend, probe, and assess arguments. In this context, Alexander argues, learning through dialogue stands in opposition to that one-sided and cognitively undemanding interaction which has been exposed consistently, by classroom research, where the teacher asks questions to which he or she knows the answers; the pupils dutifully spot or guess those answers and recognise that what they, as pupils, say carries authority only if the teacher allows it to do so. Bloom's higher order skills cannot thrive in a teacher-centred and teacher-controlled learning environment. Dialogue presumes a greater degree of reciprocity in classroom talk and relationships and lays the foundation not just of successful learning, but also of social cohesion, active citizenship and good society and obviates the recourse to conflict. When such dialogue takes place within the religious education classroom, there is a deepening of the understanding of how belief shapes the lives of individuals and communities locally, nationally and globally. The planned expectation in the dialogue classroom is that this deepening understanding of the other will also demand an examination of the impact of belief upon self and a growing eloquence in articulating this.

## The Project Report

During the topic on Places of Worship, while developing and exploring the make-up and meaning of a Christian church, the pupils and their teacher addressed the five belief-dialogue skills and their relevance to and use in this religious education topic. The teacher was the pupils' guide through the pedagogy and his commitment to the values of dialogue in religious education was no doubt significant in helping pupils appreciate how dialogue develops understanding and toleration. The population of the participating school is representative of the area of

south London where it is located and the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious make-up of the local population. Furthermore, the school's own vision that such differences and diversity are to be valued and celebrated was no doubt a further factor influencing the pupils' response to the proposed skills. After their introduction to the skills the pupils were asked to complete a questionnaire in which they recorded their thoughts on places special to them and items in these places that made them special. There followed questions on why a church might be meaningful to Christians and what they expected to like about the church and what they expected to find challenging.

The questionnaire began with *imagination* and *articulation* in order to help pupils identify, analyse and evaluate (Bloom, 1956) their own experiences. While it might be expected that in a religious education class pupils would feel that religious places might be the 'right' answer to questions on their own special places and significant items therein, this was not overwhelmingly so. Church and mosque did feature in the pupils' special places but there were far more references to home, grandparents' home, to France, Belgium, and The Caribbean as locations of significance and even to the school, the athletics track and a Theme Park. In a number of responses it was not either one or the other but church and mosques combined with home or school as special places. The special items in such places did include TVs, computers and computer games but also the Qur'an. What made these places special was these were places to be with family and community, to sit together in the church, the mosque, the lounge or to cook together in the kitchen, to be with extended family in grandparents' house or to be alone in bedroom to think, to relax and, for several, to pray and for one to luxuriate in a hot bath. The range of responses suggests a thoughtfulness concerning the things that are important to the individual and an understanding that religious education addresses issues about self, as well as the other, in contexts beyond the religiously conventional. The use of the term 'belief-dialogue' throughout this study rather than 'faith dialogue' is an attempt to address an inclusiveness that does not see dialogue in the religious education classroom as only a dialogue between people of religious faith but as an engagement that has a place for those of no religious belief and in doing so seeks to be inclusive rather than exclusive both within and beyond the classroom. Belief-dialogue helps pupils articulate their reasons for valuing people, places and things in their lives as well as developing the skills of engaging with the other whose beliefs and practices may be different, or sometimes appear strange. Alexander's (2005, p. 6) assertion that 'social cohesion, active citizenship and good society' can be the fruits of such dialogue is understandable and the belief that the dispositions resulting from such cognitive and affective development obviates the recourse to conflict is tenable.

When asked to evaluate their thinking and feelings about the approaching visit to the local church and to do so using the skills of *seriousness*, *humility* and *hesitation* the range of responses were less diverse. This may say more about the quality of the pupils' knowledge and understanding of the meaning of the church for Christian and could be a reflection on the effectiveness of the teaching and learning that preceded the questionnaire and visit. All pupils were able to articulate why a church might be meaningful for Christians and their reasons ranged around such ideas as a church is a place of prayer, a place to communicate with God, a place of worship and praise and for some this included dance as well as song. For many the community dimension was also significant as they saw Church as a place where Christians came together to worship, though one pupil also stressed that people can worship God anywhere. The pupils were willing to think about what they would expect to like about the church; the space, the colour, the silence. They were also able to say what they might find challenging; wearing dirty shoes inside the church, worshipping Jesus as well as God, the place of Mary, 'showing off their lord', why so many Christians commit crimes and the challenge of seeing Catholics as Christians. They also felt that *hesitating* before saying what you think is appropriate so as not to cause offence, hurt believers or cause a violent reaction. This range of responses in this section of the questionnaire indicates two important aspects of dialogue. One, that knowledge and learning about the other, who may be the same or different from self, is necessary for dialogue and, secondly, that it is acceptable to pose challenging and difficult questions about the other but to hesitate before asking the questions, so as to frame the question in a manner that will offer the possibility of dialogue rather than a negative reaction, and thus avoid hurt, offence or provoke violence. What was needed now was to test out their knowledge and feelings through dialogue with a member of the church community both to contextualise what their teacher had taught them and to verify their own articulation of their own responses.

## Unfinalisability, Self-awareness and Polyphony

In his *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Art,* Mikhail Bakhtin (1962) explores the ideas of *unfinalisability, self-awareness outside of self* and *polyphony*. Each of these Bakhtinian ideas offers an insight into the development of classroom dialogue within religious education and offered a paradigm for an interpretation of the data collected in the action research under consideration.

The concept of *unfinalisability* proposes that individuals, including self, cannot be finalised, completely understood, fully known or exhaustively labelled and thus

dialogue and articulation is always a partial unveiling of self to the other and, as such, the process of self-discovery and self-revelation is a life-long process of engagement which never totally captures the other or the self but each engagement has the possibility of deepening the understanding of both.

> In order to understand it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her understanding – in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirror or photograph can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space, and because they are other. (Bakhtin, 1993)

In the encounter of dialogue, the interchange between self and other reveals each to the other. When an articulate self-disclosure is brought to the encounter then the possibility of understanding is within reach even though it is never complete because the task is 'unfinalisable'. Bakhtin criticises the assumption that if two people disagree at least one of them must be in error. For Bakhtin, truth is carried in a multitude of voices and cannot be held by a single voice or carried in a single mind.

Unfinalisability raises three significant issues for this action research and in doing so opens up the next phases of an on-going research programme. Firstly, dialogue, in contrast to debate, within the classroom does not look for winners and losers and final resolution. Teaching pupils the skills of dialogue develops a skill that has relevance beyond the religious education lesson and this particular topic. It offers the means of encountering difference with confidence and curiosity and opens up the possibility of civil and creative coexistence in inter-cultural, inter-faith, inter-ethnic exchange. To reiterate the quotation from Alexander (2006, p. 5) above, dialogue lays the foundations for social cohesion, active citizenship and good society. Secondly, the unfinalisability of belief became apparent in this action research project both as pupils shared their own beliefs and their thoughts about the belief and practices of others recorded their thoughts on the questionnaires. This could be in the context of some  understanding of what makes the other's place special and an appreciation of its difference from that of self or an appreciation that there are individual and communal special places, some are the same as self's, others are different, but all make a claim to being special. Being 'special', for places or for people, does not have to be finalisable in a tolerant and inclusive society. Thirdly, *special things* is not a definitive term for items that bestow specialness on a place. What bestowed significance last year may do less so this year or even be replaced by something else. However, are there items that carry greater significance that others; Qur'an, for example, over Adidas trainers? Engaging with the

question of significance and specialness is the learning task rather than finalising the answer. For the pupils involved in this research the development of dialogue skills cannot be fully grasped or practiced in one religious education topic and this has pushed the researcher and his teacher-collaborator into planning the next phase of this on-going research project.

Coping with the challenge of wearing shoes in the church when they are removed on entering the mosque evoked a vivid *self-awareness outside of self* both for the Muslim pupil who articulated the challenge, for the Christians for whom wearing shoes in church is normal practice and for the teacher and researcher who analysed this piece of data. This Muslim pupil has asked himself why he takes off his shoes on entering his mosque and has articulated his response which allows him to ask the same question of the Christian knowing that the answer will not be the same as his own. In this dialogical process there is an awareness of self as perceived by another.

The place of Bakhtin's 'polyphony' within the context of this research project finds a resonance within the complexity of inter-cultural, inter-ethnic, inter-religious community of the class, the school and its south east London location. In his study of young people in Southall, England, Gerd Bauman (1990, pp. 26, 31) proposes the notion of the 'demotic discourse' which is representative of the cosmopolitan nature of cities and suburbs across the globe where cultures, religions, races and generations rub shoulders and seek ways of communication with each other. Bauman identifies young people's ability to communicate across a range of registers changing as they talk to grandparents, parents, teachers, religious leaders or their peers. He compares this polyphonic ability to a jazz jamming session rather than a synchronised symphony orchestra. In a jamming session a musician can augment, reflect, continue, challenge and even counter a melody but all within an integrated piece, following understood norms. Bakhtin's polyphony and Bauman's demotic discourse bring further insight into belief-dialogue in the religious education classroom of this research project. Belief dialogue may resemble a jazz jamming session in the skills needed to exercise a growing expertise in belief literacy for self and the other. Both need a foundational knowledge and understanding of the activity in which they are engaged. Through the skills of dialogue the pupils in this research project found a language to talk about what was special to them while listening to their fellow pupils' expressions of their own and preparing to dialogue with a member of the local Anglican community concerning the significance of their church. No doubt many of the pupils possessed, and were using, some of these skills prior to the action research project. What the project did achieve, however, was to expose and examine these skills and interrogate their effectiveness in articulating belief and promoting dialogue and, in doing so, refine

and develop the pupils' ability to use them with clarity and precision thus realising some of the real potential of religious education.

## Conclusions from the project

There are three conclusions to draw from this research project. First, it is possible to teach and to learn the skills of dialogue which is consistent with Benjamin Bloom's (1956) belief in teaching thinking skills, or the use of Edward De Bono's (1985) Thinking Hats in the classroom or teachers' commitment to Matthew Lipmann's (1988) Philosophy for Children. Secondly, that learning belief-dialogue necessitates the use of higher order thinking skills (Bloom, 1956) and in doing so moves religious education away from an accumulation of a shopping basket full of names, facts and figures to a contextualisation and articulation of lived beliefs; the beliefs of self and the other. This offers teachers and pupils the wherewithal to address the challenges raised by the OfSTED Subject Reports and help religious education realise some of its potential. Thirdly, that learning dialogue skills cannot be achieved without acquiring knowledge and an understanding of belief systems and practices but, for dialogue to be possible, the first person other needs to participate and respond to the pupils' knowledge, understanding and reactions. This was a weakness in the project and will be addressed in the future. The teacher laid the foundations for the dialogue by teaching the skills but the practice of the dialogue needed a partner in the church host. While the host on this occasion offered a warm welcome and answered questions, it is not possible to say a dialogue between the pupils and the church community ensued. This raises the difficulty with dialogue mentioned above, that the preparedness and willingness of participants in belief-dialogue is indispensible.

Furthermore, the repeat of the same questionnaire at the end of the topic, in the hope of identifying progress in pupils' thinking, was unsuccessful for two reasons. First, the above report on the pupils' initial response indicated that they had already achieved a depth of thinking on what made a place special for them due to the teacher's efforts and a further question on this was simply repetitious and provided no further insight into the pupils' ability to use the skills of *articulation* and *imagination.* Secondly, the absence of a dialogue partner from the church community failed to offer pupils' the opportunity to share their insights into the significance of the church for believers nor the opportunity to hear and digest the believers responses to the issues that the pupils found challenging. Both of these issues will be addressed in the planned subsequent project.

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## Dialogue, Religion, Conflict and Education

In the UK issues around religion and community cohesion abound as demonstrated in the Labour Government's Prevent Agenda (2008), the current Conservative Government's Big Society agenda (2010), the Faith and Cohesion Project (Coles, 2006), the Save The Children's Diversity and Dialogue Report (Hatch, 2006) and the RE Council of England and Wales REsilience Project (2009). In a wider European context, the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* published by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE, 2007) cannot hide the presupposed synergy between religious education and security. Each of the above has raised, and continues to raise, relevant and often contested issues for religious education in the UK. Some have felt uncomfortable with too close an association between teaching Islam and an anti-terrorism agenda while many in the Muslim community have been outraged by this association. The *Religion in Education: a contribution to dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European countries?* (REDCo2006-2009) was a European Union funded project and one of their findings is particularly apposite to the themes of *religion, conflict* and e*ducation* and the belief-dialogue research above. This extensive European project (including the UK)  found that "students who learn about religious diversity in school are more willing to have conversations about religion/belief with students of other backgrounds than those who do not" (REDCo, 2009). Whatever the feelings on the issues of *religion, conflict* and *education* might be, these issues are relevant to religious education in schools because religious education sees itself as making a contribution to pupils' understanding of themselves and the world in which they find themselves (QCA, 2004, REC, 2013). The association between religion and national and international conflict cannot be ignored even if some teachers decide to keep it out of the classroom. It is the argument of this paper that teaching and practising belief dialogue skills in the classroom, and beyond, can be a means by which pupils 'learn about religious diversity' and are then able 'to have conversations about religion/belief' (REDCo, 2009). More than this, they will develop the skills not only to have a conversation that results in toleration of the other but a conversation that can lead to dialogue at a level where differences as well as similarities, challenges as well as complements, are exchanged in a manner which do not lead to hurt or violence. It is for this reason that dialogue is antithetical to conflict.

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