



Dialogue & Argumentation
for Cultural Literacy Learning
in Schools

DIALLS Deepening Impact 2022 Feedback from Teachers involved

Introduction

The 'DIALLS Deepening Impact' project built on a three-year completed EC Horizon 2020 project DIALLS ('Dialogue and Argumentation for cultural Literacy Learning in Schools') that focused on teaching children in primary and secondary schools the dialogue skills to engage together with tolerance, empathy and inclusion. The DIALLS programme uses short, wordless films and picturebooks as stimuli for discussions about cultural themes related to living together, social responsibility and belonging. An extensive set of open access materials (<https://dialls2020.eu>) for teachers was produced and trialled including professional development materials, a programme of innovative lessons, assessment rubrics and, importantly, a rich resource of European short films to stimulate discussions about cultural themes, building dialogue skills through practice.

In these difficult times learning to communicate ideas and understand each other's perspectives is more important than ever and the Deepening Impact project's objective focused on working further with the teachers who were part of the original project. In the original project, the teachers worked with films and picturebooks as part of their whole class teaching. In this impact project, we focused on the potential of small group teaching to deepen discussions and enhance dialogue as a social practice while targeting children who might benefit from more focused support by supporting their overall confidence and dialogue skills.

Research context

Existing research shows that classrooms where ideas can be shared, and the skills of dialogue are explicitly taught and practised, offer children the opportunity to engage meaningfully with different perspectives. This engagement can foster dispositions of tolerance, empathy and inclusion, and promote behaviours which reflect 'cultural literacy'. Whilst previous theorists have used this term to highlight knowledge of cultural practices and outputs, DIALLS reconceptualised the term to regard it as a 'dialogic social practice' centralising the importance of culture as fluid, relational and a lived experience.¹ Importantly, it recognises that relating to each other is crucial for a pluralistic society which celebrates diversity and central to this are the dispositions of tolerance, empathy and inclusion.

¹ Maine, F., Cook, V & Lähdesmäki, T. (2019). Reconceptualizing Cultural Literacy as a Dialogic Practice, *London Review of Education*, 17 (3): 384–393. <https://DOI.org/10.18546/LRE.17.3.12>

Much of the research into classroom dialogue focuses on cognitive growth and impact on student attainment.² Centralising dialogue as a social practice in DIALLS led to deeper analysis of how teachers build a dialogic ethos in the classroom³. A further trend investigating educational dialogue (or argumentation) in small groups⁴ tends to measure its impact on reasoning or critical thinking. Less explored territory is the valuable role of provisional thinking in these encounters, as indicated through the types of language demonstrated in the Dialogue Progression Tool⁵ created during the original project. Previous research has highlighted the importance of engaging dialogically — reader to text and reader to reader — with visual texts as a means to enhance meaning making.⁶

This existing research framework supported the professional learning sessions with the teachers during this project: sharing the findings, encouraging critically reflective discussion, exploring the concept of dialogic readers and how talking about texts (in this case, wordless picturebooks) can promote genuine dialogue⁷ with particular focus on the different roles and responsibilities that are apparent in small group discussions and how teachers can guide them most effectively.

Outline of the project

For teachers, the Deepening Impact project presented a further professional learning opportunity. Key to effective professional learning are agency, innovation and spaced learning. Our objective was, therefore, to build a community of practice for teachers to share their innovations and challenges, but with clear aims and activities for each meeting.

We recruited 19 DIALLS teachers: ten Early Years and Key Stage 1 teachers and ten Key Stage 2 teachers (one teacher taught in both Key Stages), see Figure 1. Sets of four, age appropriate, different picturebooks (left over from the original project) were posted to the teachers to support their work in small groups. In January 2022, we held an initial zoom meeting where we shared our goals and initial thoughts. To ensure teacher agency and ownership of the initiative, teachers were invited to select groups of children for their small groups. We discussed the potential benefits of working with different groups and types of learners, for example, those with limited oral language skills such as speakers of English as additional language (EAL), newly arrived refugee children, or just children who lacked confidence and were more reluctant to speak in whole class settings.

² Howe, C., Hennessy, S., Mercer, N., Vrikki, M. & Wheatley, L. (2019). Teacher–Student Dialogue During Classroom Teaching: Does It Really Impact on Student Outcomes? *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 28(4-5), 462–512.

³ Maine, F. & Čermáková, A. (2021). Using linguistic ethnography as a tool to analyse dialogic teaching in upper primary classrooms. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction* 29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2021.100500>

⁴ Soter, A., Wilkinson, I., Murphy, K., Rudge, L., Reninger, K. & Edwards, M. (2008). What the discourse tells us: Talk and indicators of high-level comprehension. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 47(6), 372–391. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2009.01.001>

⁵ <https://dialls2020.eu/spcl/>

⁶ Maine, F. (2015). *Dialogic Readers: children talking and thinking together about visual texts*. London: Routledge.

⁷ Buber, M. (1947). *Between Man and Man*. (R.G. Smith Trans.) London: Routledge
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2019.1573730>

Between January and April 2022, we held five meetings with the teachers in total. The teachers were invited to keep reflective diaries. In May, we distributed an online questionnaire to be able to map the teachers' experience.

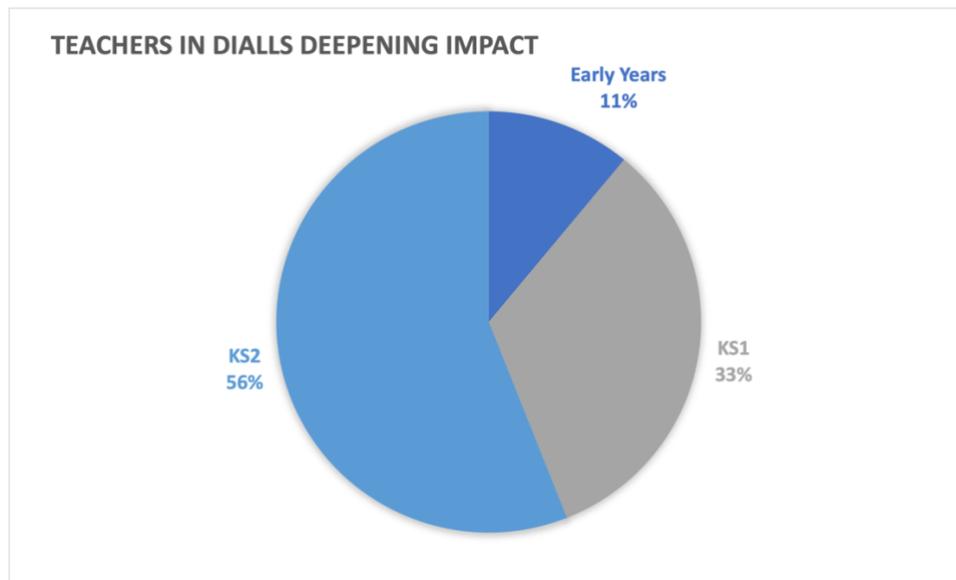


Figure 1. Teachers involved in DIALLS Deepening Impact project.

Project findings

The teachers, having had a very positive previous experience with the original DIALLS project, were enthusiastic to participate in this follow-up initiative. In addition to the positive experience before, many of them repeatedly mentioned that after the original DIALLS, they could see visible improvement in their children's confidence in communication. The teachers also stressed that in addition to the valuable dialogic skills that are practised through DIALLS, the DIALLS themes – tolerance, empathy and inclusion – were crucial and even more important now after the pandemic and lockdowns. They were also enthusiastic to try out DIALLS in small group work in addition to the whole class teaching as in the previous project.

Being part of DIALLS from the beginning I have always found that the children that I have worked with have been enthused and motivated from the materials and many children that wouldn't normally have a voice felt that they could join in. Working with a small group to do this, meant each of them could put their point across instead of letting others speak for them.
[KS2 teacher]

The teachers were given considerable freedom in organising their work and choosing their focus (intervention) groups. As the Covid pandemic had still considerably disrupted the school year due to a high number of absences of both teachers and children, some of the teachers did not manage to organise as many DIALLS sessions as they wished for: on average, the children had between 2 to 6 sessions, but some had sessions twice a week throughout the term. Most of the teachers (70%) organised these small group sessions outside normal teaching time, some had small focus groups during the whole class DIALLS sessions and some had small groups during other lessons when the rest

of the class were working independently. This clearly shows that DIALLS offers flexible approaches for incorporating into the school day, see Figure 2.

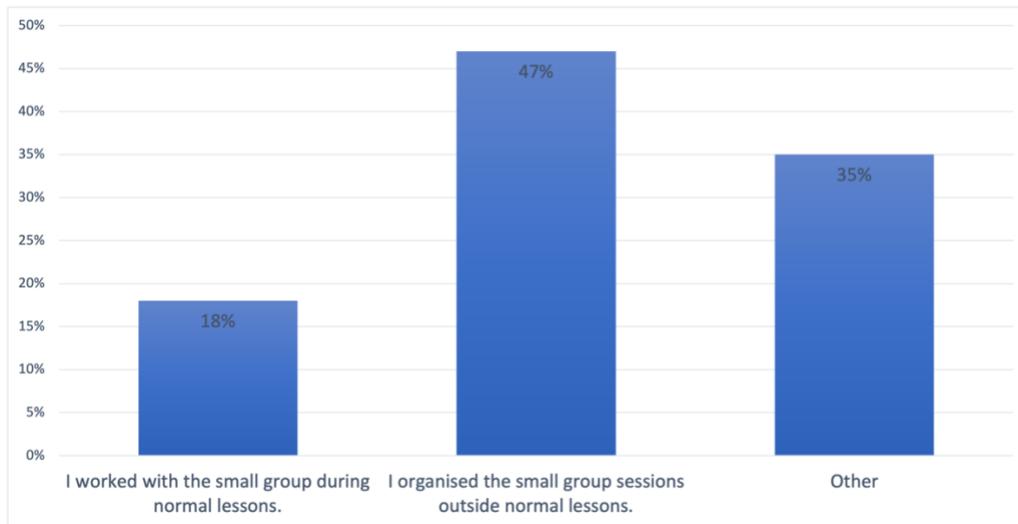


Figure 2. DIALLS small group sessions throughout the school day.

Each of the teachers had a different strategy and rationale for choosing their focus group children – the common denominator being lack of the children’s confidence to join in whole class discussions and the need to develop oracy skills: this may have been due to EAL (35%), SEND, or generally lower than age related expectations and Pupil premium children.

It is interesting to note that though the focus in this project was on small group teaching, the majority of the teachers (65%) also continued to use DIALLS materials from the previous project, particularly the films, also in their whole class sessions, i.e., in addition to using the wordless picturebooks provided by DIALLS in the small group interventions, they also used films in their whole class teaching. Whilst difficult to quantify the impact of the intervention, due to the necessarily individual learning needs of the children chosen to participate, the majority of the teachers reported significant confidence boost in most of the participating children and consequently their better engagement in the whole class teaching including other subjects, which, for many, was the main goal.

I feel that these children have better skills to listen to each other and engage in discussions with respect. They use sentence stems from our discussions in other subjects, especially in Maths. Based on this experience, I would like to continue teaching children dialogue and argumentation skills in the future. [KS2 teacher]

I feel the children really grew in confidence. They developed the confidence to contribute more in class discussions. Other teachers who read with some of the children also noted a difference, especially how they seemed more interested in the guided reading sessions and less worried about making mistakes with their decoding. [Early Years teacher]

Many of the teachers also reported how much the children enjoyed the sessions but also improved relationships with their peers, particularly those participating in the small groups. The project books were also shared in their class libraries and many have become very popular. The teachers stressed

that in addition to improving the children's dialogic skills, the cultural values and topics the project introduced were equally important – the books addressed both very personal topics that many children could relate to, such as *Mein Weg Mitt Vanessa* (Kerascoët, 2018) about a new girl joining the school, other books like *Changeons* (Francesco Guistozi, 2017) focusing on climate change or *Meidän piti lähteä* (Sanna Pelliccioni, 2018) focusing on refugees were among the books addressing timely general topics that particularly seemed to resonate with the children. Overall, many of the teachers reported visible improvement in communication skills over time, small group discussions becoming more structured and having evolved into respectful opinion sharing rather than only teacher led guided discussions.

Reflecting on their practice, the teachers reported various aspects that had been influenced by their involvement in DIALLS: from greater awareness and mindfulness of the quieter children and removing barriers for them to communicate better to greater appreciation of picturebooks in teaching, greater acknowledgment of the wealth of knowledge children bring to class based on their experience and understanding how valuable and needed is greater time for processing. The teachers also stressed and valued the different aspects of teaching DIALLS in whole class and small groups. The teachers praised the DIALLS materials, e.g. lesson prompts, for their ease of use. The 'Dialogue Progression Tool' (<https://dialls2020.eu/spc1/>), which was developed during the original project, was actively used by about half of the teachers (53%) throughout this second stage with some other planning on exploring the tool in the future.

Generally, the teachers were extremely positive about the valuable experience, DIALLS has brought to their practice and classes. Several of them mentioned they wished they had more time to incorporate DIALLS in their teaching more often:

I feel that we have fully achieved what was planned although time is always a precious commodity. In the future I would feel happier that all pupils in class are provided with the opportunity to work in smaller focussed groups on these books as I know that it has the potential to work for both M.A.T and A.L.N pupils. [KS1 teacher]

All of the teachers involved in this stage of the project reported they intend to continue to use DIALLS resources in some form in the future, see Figure 3 below. One of the enthusiastic teachers managed to persuade the school leadership to incorporate DIALLS into whole school teaching:

I feel like as long as I'm involved with DIALLS (which is why I'm so excited that we've rolled it out across the Trust), my practice will continue developing in new ways and, in turn, making a difference to children ... I know that this has been the case through participate in this phase but that it will also continue to be the case. [KS2 teacher]

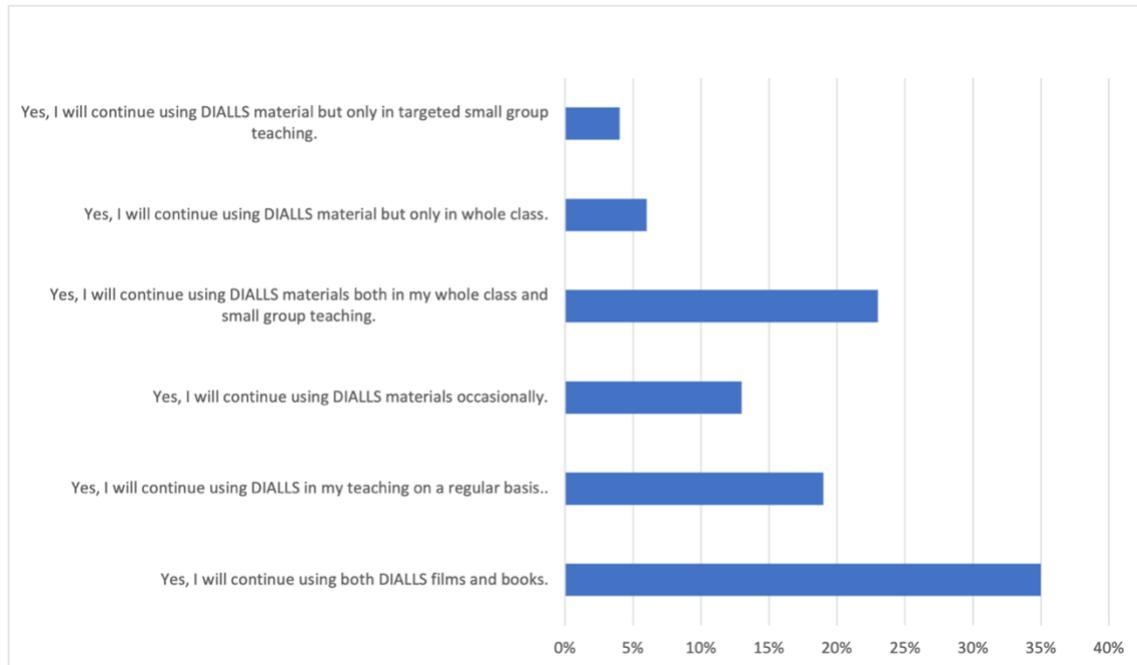


Figure 3. The teachers' planned future involvement with DIALLS.

DIALLS resources

The books used in the project were:

EY and Key Stage One

Owl Bat Bat Owl: <https://dialls2020.eu/library/owl-bat-bat-owl/>

Mein Weg mit Vanessa: <https://dialls2020.eu/library/i-walk-with-vanessa-mein-weg-mit-vanessa/>

El Campo/ La Cuidad: <https://dialls2020.eu/library/the-city-la-ciudad-the-countryside-el-campo/>

Where's the Elephant: <https://dialls2020.eu/library/wheres-the-elephant/>

Key Stage Two

Changeons: <https://dialls2020.eu/library/change-changeons/>

My Museum: <https://dialls2020.eu/library/my-museum/>

Meidän Piti Lähteä: <https://dialls2020.eu/library/we-had-to-leave-meidan-piti-lahtea/>

Zaterdag: <https://dialls2020.eu/library/saturday-zaterdag/>

<https://dialls2020.eu/>

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