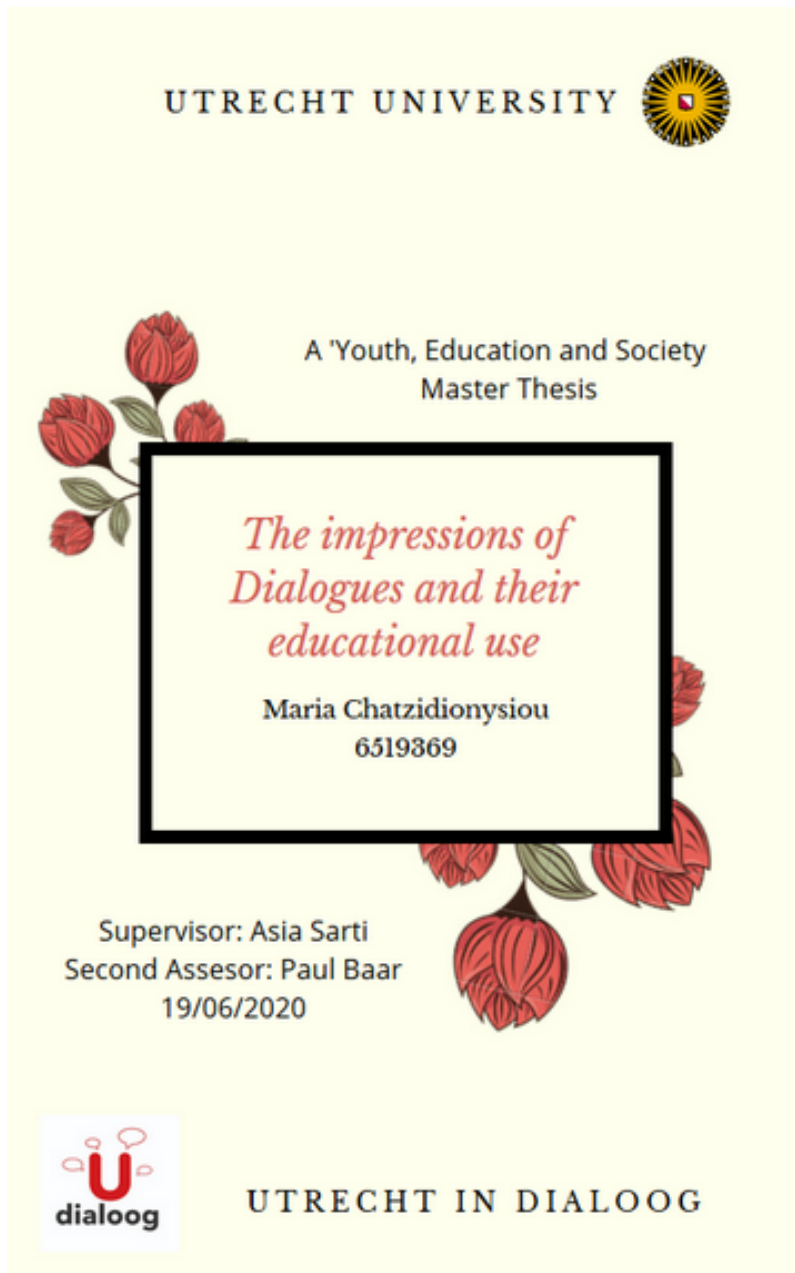


The impressions of Dialogues and their educational use



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### **Abstract**

This research study examines individual experiences of participants of Utrecht in Dialogoog's events. The purpose of this study is to document how young participants of Dialogues or participants related to the educational field experience dialogues, the potential usage of Dialogues as an educational tool and the self-perceived benefits that Dialogues could have on minimizing social polarization and maximizing social inclusion. A qualitative approach was selected as the research method for this study, through the use of twenty semi-structured interviews.

Social polarization can damage social cohesion and slow down economic growth, leaving individuals and groups segregated, where social inclusion can enhance the feeling of belonging to the community and lead to less conflicts. The research findings indicate that social polarization is a worldwide issue, as much as it appears in the Dutch society and educational system. Striving for social inclusion is the goal of several municipalities and organizations alike and this research serves the purpose of identifying the prospects of using Utrecht in Dialogoog' methodology as an educational tool. However, the participants do not all share similar experiences of Dialogues as noted in the findings and are not all wishing for the methodology to be applied in the educational field unconditionally.

**Key words:** social polarization, social inclusion, dialogues, education

### **Abstract**

Dit afstudeer onderzoek richt zich op de individuele ervaringen van participanten van 'Utrecht in Dialogoog' evenementen. Het doel van deze studie is om vast te leggen hoe jonge deelnemers die een relatie hebben met het educatieve veld, de dialogen hebben ervaren en hoe volgens hen een Dialogoog gebruikt kan worden als een educatief instrument. In het onderzoek staat de vraag centraal welke bijdrage zij waarnemen die de Dialogoog kunnen hebben aan het minimaliseren van sociale polarisatie en het bevorderen van sociale inclusie. Binnen deze studie is gekozen voor een kwalitatieve aanpak, met als onderzoeksmethode semi-gestructureerde interviews

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(n=20). Sociale polarisatie kan de sociale cohesie aantasten en daarmee een negatieve impact hebben op economische groei doordat individuen en groepen worden buitengesloten. Dit terwijl sociale inclusie juist het gevoel van saamhorigheid kan vergroten en daarmee kan leiden tot vermindering van conflicten. Het onderzoek laat zien dat sociale polarisatie een wereldwijd fenomeen is dat zich ook in de Nederlandse samenleving en de educatieve sector manifesteert. Het streven naar sociale inclusie is een speerpunt voor diverse organisaties en deze studie heeft tot doel de mogelijkheden van het gebruik van de methodologie van 'Utrecht in Dialoog' voor educatieve doeleinden in kaart te brengen. Uit de resultaten blijkt dat niet alle participanten dezelfde ervaringen delen als het gaat om de 'Dialoog' en dat zij daarmee ook verdeeld zijn over de inzetbaarheid ervan in de educatieve sector.

**Sleutelwoorden:** Sociale polarisatie, sociale inclusie, dialogen, educatie

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### **The impressions of Dialogues and their educational use**

Structured dialogues incorporated in education could help alleviate the consequences of social polarization in ideas and foster the sense of social inclusion. In order to investigate this hypothesis, commissioning party to this study is Utrecht in Dialoog, an independent charity foundation based in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Utrecht in Dialoog uses structured conversations in order to respectfully address polarizing topics in society, bring people together by sharing their experiences and dreams and motivate them to follow individual or collective actions for societal and personal improvements.

The main issues that are going to be discussed are social polarization, and especially in terms of ideas, and the hesitance of educators to address polarizing topics in class. Potential use of 'Dialogues', as they have been formulated from Utrecht in Dialoog could assist in inclusion of every students in school life (of any educational level) and thus this research is focusing on the perceptions of young adults and educators on the application and usefulness of these Dialogues' methodology.

### **Theoretical framework**

From different literature sources it seems essential to focus on polarization of society, as it is described as the core societal problem that has to be studied (Van Wonderen, Van den Berg, Reches, Van Suylen, 2019). Within the main reasons to study how to tackle social polarization is the implications that it appears to have on a plethora of social, economic, and political phenomena, and in particular those related to social tensions and conflict (Permanyer & D'Ambrosio, 2013, Permanyer, 2012). The definition of social polarization that this research will be focused on is stated as "the sharpening of contradictions between groups in society, which can result in tensions between these groups and increased segregation along ethnic and religious lines" (Van Wonderen, Van den Berg, Reches, & Van Suylen, 2019, p. 22).

Other literature sources also support that specifically ethnic and racial polarization undermines economic growth (Keefer & Knack, 2002, Hanmeet, 2001), and therefore is considered a threat to any society. On this issue, other publications had suggested that the causation relation is the exact opposite. They suggest that differences in income, consumption, and wealth is the root to polarization and not the other way around (Duclos, Esteban & Ray,

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2004). This way the alienation that individuals and groups may feel from one another stems from the social polarization that the inequalities within the society have created and thus divide the society further on ideas (Duclos, Esteban & Ray, 2004). Intersecting forms of polarization based on age, sex, geographical location and work opportunities, are patterns which produce extra divisions in society in terms of ideas (Palh, 1988).

On the other hand, social inclusion can directly counter those consequences. The notion of social inclusion is usually mentioned as the approach to solve child poverty, unemployed youth and racial minorities in deprived neighbourhoods. No central definition for social inclusion exists, but different approaches describe it as a situation, a theory, a process or an aspect. 'A situation in which individuals are integrated into the economic, social, and political framework of society' (Oxoby, 2009, p.2), 'a theory of how society can be integrated and harmonious' (Collins, 2003, p. 9) and 'the process of opportunity enhancement for building or re-establishing social bonds by facilitating the access of all citizens to social activity, income and public institutions' (Oxoby, 2009, p. 10). Taking all these information in consideration, the definition of social inclusion that this study will focus is 'an aspect of how one perceives their access to institutions and resources in the decision making environment (Oxoby, 2009, p. 11), which put the self-perception of people in spotlight. Access to public institutions, engagement to decision making, social activity integration and equal opportunities can all depend on the educational field and how inclusive or not it is.

### **Problem's context**

For the last decades, there has been an increasing urgency to tackle societal issues in the global community, as well as the Netherlands. Along with the increasingly diverse population of the Netherlands, in the four big cities, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, the Hague and Utrecht, there is a separation of groups that do not encounter each other which encourages distrust and could, thus, be a threat to the cohesion of the Dutch society (Huijnk, Dagevos, Gijsberts, & Andriessen, 2015).

Social polarization in terms of ideas could be a problem to the Dutch society in many ways. For instance, around 61% of the Dutch population feels tensions between the native-Dutch population and population of immigrant descent (Leeman & Saharso, 2013). Dutch citizens feel

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increasing contradictions in opinions and that opinions are getting more divided (Beugelsdijk, de Hart, van Houwelingen, & Versantvoort, M. 2019). Furthermore, they are reported as worried about polarization, intolerance, disagreements and the pressure to choose a side (Beugelsdijk et al., 2019). Polarization in opinions is also linked to effects on slowing down decision making and delay in responding to crisis (Keefer & Knack, 2002).

Social polarization can also be witnessed in the education system. Teachers state they don't know how to engage in conversations about polarization in society (Kleijwegt, 2016). Many teachers at all levels do not feel they are equipped to develop lesson plans on polarizing or controversial topics within the class and don't feel prepared to respond effectively when such topics arise unexpectedly during lessons (Muth, Polizzi, & Glynn, 2007). Adding to the complexity of this task is the intersecting diversity that students and educators bring in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, age, religious and spiritual affiliation, and sexual orientation (Burton, Furr, 2014). Especially in terms of ethnic lines, there is a gap between educators' level of conceptual understanding of appearing conflicts and their skills and abilities in responding to challenging interactions with students (Burton & Furr, 2014). This leads to teachers being more reluctant to have an honest and open conversation around burning social issues that are being discussed in the public sphere (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000).

Towards this direction, local governments' initiatives, as well as organizations', are focused on limiting polarization and promoting inclusion in society. The idea that people feel accepted and appreciated in society is seen by the local governments as a way to reduce the breeding ground of radicalization and tighten the gaps between groups in the city (Gemeente Utrecht, 2018). Since 2017, Task Force 'We Are Utrecht Together' in Utrecht for instance aims at the prevention of polarization through working on an inclusive society (Gemeente Utrecht, 2018). At the same time, most of the youth in Utrecht is reported to be positively oriented towards meeting with youth from other cultural backgrounds (Gielen, Van Wonderen, & Hermens, 2012).

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### **Current research**

Intergroup conflict and tension have been a challenge reference for educators and the request to develop safe spaces and environments has been underlined (Burton & Furr, 2014). Existing studies confirm that if discussions about important or controversial topics are held in an open and supportive learning environment, this leads to decreased dogmatism that is directly associated with polarization in ideas (Evans, Avery & Pederson, 2000). Conversations in the class are necessary, because they can create a higher engagement among students (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). When teachers intentionally address polarizing societal issues, such as religion, social class, race and culture, power, and privilege, they can facilitate rich discussions in ways that benefit students' learning in a democratic society (Hess & Gatti, 2010). Skillful use of de-escalating and meditative strategies and interventions is key to ensure positive outcomes in conversation between students (Burton & Furr, 2014). But what type of conversations constitute the most effective strategies in dealing with the mentioned issues?

Many professionals have been discussing the usage of debates (organized and facilitated argumentation in sides about a specific topic) in classrooms as a tool to promote structured and controlled conversations around social issues (like death penalty, pregnancy termination etc). Nevertheless, there is yet to be investigated how non-formal education practices can play a role to fighting polarization of opinions in society.

For this purpose, 'Utrecht in Dialog' strives to stimulate dialogues between inhabitants of Utrecht with a diverse background on societal-inspired themes. Their aim is to provide room for dialogues in the city to make perceived sensitive and complex issues negotiable and manageable, which is achieved by having structured discussions focused on a specific theme each time, facilitated by a trained member in a group of five to six people in every gathering (thereby mentioned as 'Dialogues'). Dialogues could be used in the classroom as an educational tool against social polarization and towards fostering social inclusion between students, as it doesn't focus on argumentation, defense and winning.

This research is aimed at gaining knowledge on how the participants of Utrecht in Dialogue events perceive the use of 'Dialogues' as a possible educational tool against social polarization and towards social inclusion. UiD defines 'Dialogue' as the discussion that is structured in four steps and is based on eight ground rules that are being followed in each Dialogue event. This methodology, inspired by the so-called '5-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry'

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(Utrecht in Dialog, 2019, “What is a dialogue?”), as well as the ground rules exactly as they are being mentioned from the organization can be found in the Appendix. Those rules may seem relevant and needed background in understanding the ground in which the participants of the research answer the questions. During the interviews the methodology of the steps is being referred to as “three different phases: sharing, dreaming, acting/action part”, as the introduction is mostly about welcoming everyone and breaking the ice, and thus never perceived from participants as an actual planned step. The procedure follows the following steps: each participant shares their personal experience associated with the chosen theme of the specific event, the second phase is for each one to describe their ideal goal linked to the theme and lastly everyone has to think of what practical actions they can do from the following day in order to reach this goal.

The main research question of this study is: What are the self-perceived benefits of a dialogue to the individuals who chose to participate in Utrecht in Dialogue’s event? Sub-questions are: How is the process of the dialogues being perceived by these participants based on their own experience? Do they find the three-layered methodology useful as an educational tool to prevent social polarization in class and why? Could dialogues, in their opinion, be used to promote social inclusion in the classroom and under which circumstances?



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### **Methodology and analysis**

Qualitative research is a type of social science research that is inductive in nature and gathers and process non-numerical data (Mohajan, 2018). This study seeks to interpret meaning from the data gathered, which focuses on the insights of targeted populations that have already first-hand experience in the field (education) and with the organization (UiD) (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The purpose of choosing qualitative research design is to describe and interpret the described above issues systematically from the point of view of young people and educators. It is the observations and interpretations of Dialogue participants on the same Dialogue methodology and their perception of its' usefulness. It seeks to explain 'how' and 'why' this methodology is useful against social polarization and/or in favor of social inclusion in the particular context of an educational setting.

In this research Grounded Theory approach is used since it is attempted to derive a general theory grounded in the views of participants of the study (Vişcu, 2012). It starts from a position where the researcher doesn't have any prior knowledge about the specific subject of the study (application of Dialogues' methodology in educational settings), so that all concepts truly emerge from the data (Mohajan, 2018). Grounded theory also supports constant data comparison and suggests data analysis to happen simultaneously as data collection, to allow the researcher to refine the research question and data collection procedures in the light of new findings (Mohajan, 2018). Lastly it enables the researcher to recognize the most predominant data so to assign a meaning and to explore the perspectives of homogenous, as well as diverse groups of individuals (Mohajan, 2018, & Vişcu, 2012). This assist in the breaking down of the points of view within the same community, gaining new insights and can contribute to suggesting possible relationships, causes, effects, and dynamic processes (Mohajan, 2018).

Following this method, data were gathered through interviews, particularly semi-structured interviews (see Appendix for interview guide). Due to the COVID-19 crisis in the Netherlands, the data gathering process consisted of conducting and recording 30-minutes semi-structured online interviews through Zoom, without rewards of any kind (money or services) to the participants. The online interviews were held once and conducted in English. Semi-structured questions were chosen as they are particularly ideal for approaching situational meanings or collecting self-interpretations in an open way (Flick, 2004).

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### **Operationalisation**

When designing the interview guide, the first two introduction questions were put in place to break the ice, develop rapport and provide relevant background information for participants' relation to the commissioner party 'Utrecht in Dialog'.

Concepts that are relevant in this research are self-perception of UiD Dialogues' methodology and its 'usefulness' when applied in a school setting with the goal of reducing social polarization and fostering social inclusion. Indicators of their opinions were given directly from the participants' answers and follow-up interview questions when that was needed, based on the notions of "social polarization" and "social inclusion" that the participants' defined themselves each time. Moreover, when referring to 'usefulness' words like '(not) helpful' were expected to appear.

All the interview process has been designed to be guided by participants' responses, aims to discover the interviewee's own framework of meanings and avoid imposing of the researcher's structures and assumptions. Having this as a guiding principal, going further from the introduction questions, it was asked from participants to develop and explain with their own words their perception of what is happening in a Dialogue event. This served the purpose of defying their personal connection to the Dialogue methodology and reassure that they have clear memories of the core subject of the research. Continuing, the focus went on the main research question and later the next 5 more specific questions followed to investigate different aspects of the research issue that reflect the sub-questions. Lastly, the interview comes to an end with two outro questions on other possible settings for Dialogue methodology that is more relevant for participants and where/if they would personally use it. This connects the idea of the Dialogue events not only to UiD or a classroom, but opens the possibility of them experimenting with the methodology for social inclusion and less polarization on ideas in their own everyday lives.

The format of the questions followed in the semi-structured interviews fall into three broad categories A) Organisational context and B) Societal context and C) the combination of those dimensions.

#### **A. Organisational context**

- **Participant's relations with Dialogues:** motives and personal connection.
- **Perceived effectiveness of the methodology** based on their needs.

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**B. Societal context**

- **Social polarisation:** personal perspective and experience of the phenomenon.
- **Social inclusion:** personal perspective and experience of the phenomenon.

**C. Combination of organisational and societal dimensions.**

- **Dialogues as a tool** addressed to the above issues: potential application in classroom and beyond.

This structure is chosen in order to build the conversation starting from the opinions of participants in the main question and then digging deeper on analyzing their positionality, provide context for their views on societal issues and the background that their suggestions are based on. The purpose of providing their personal definitions of social polarization and social inclusion aims to firstly get insights on what understanding each individual have of the social issues in the Netherlands (or her/his national and international reality), which would influence how she/he answers on the sub-questions. Individuals who believe that social polarization is a great problem in their lives, have formed a different perception of how this issue plays out also in education and are able to reflect on how different Dialogue methodologies could be applied to amplify its consequences. At the same time, a participant that doesn't think that social polarization is an issue could still provide valuable insights on how to cultivate the conditions for social inclusion, if she/he believes that such conditions apply around them.

The flow of the interview followed each participant's knowledge and each person's own vocabulary was used when framing supplementary questions. these follow up questions reached the meaning that participants were conveying with the added help of summing up or paraphrasing their statements, thus double checking their intention, in order to limit possible personal bias later on the analysis part. The execution was an interactive process, so questions that in the first interviews seemed ineffective, were removed or phrased differently. Specific wording of questions was difficult to standardize and the order of questions varied, but the main skeleton can be found as appendix.

**Sampling and selection**

The sample consisted of 20 participants in total (13 females and 7 males), with half of them (10) having a background in education and/or teaching (approximate ages between 24 and 45) and the

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other half belonging in the category of youth/young adults (approximate ages between 20 and 30). All of the participants have at least one dialogue participation (online or face-to-face), while 11 of them have an extended experience with Utrecht in Dialogoog's Dialogue events varying from 2 months to 2 years. Participants are also categorized as either 1) **Dutch** citizens, 2) **Expats** working in the Netherlands, 3) **International students** studying in the Netherlands and 4) Participants outside the Netherlands who joined the **online dialogues**, based on their relation with the Netherlands. A table with an overview of the information given can be found as Appendix.

The criteria of participants profiles were chosen to showcase the self-perceived benefits of using Dialogues as an educational tool from multiple relevant perspectives. Educators that are building the tools and methodologies they will bring in the classroom or already having years of experience in the field, and young people that can reflect on their own learning environment, complete the picture of educational practice and builds the mosaic of perspectives needed for examining their self-perceived value of Dialogues as an educational tool. All participants in UiD Dialogue events of 2020 who match the criteria mentioned above were contacted through the UiD's official email account (due to respect of General Data Protection Regulation -GDPR) and the 20 first that responded to the call were chosen to complete the interviews online, in tries to assure the randomised selection of participants with a matching profile. All research background information was provided in a pdf form in the contact email in order to read it beforehand and sign a paper form to validate their participation and provide their informed consent. Again, due to implications of COVID-19 stay at home orders, participants were reporting they didn't have the time or the means to print and scan the document, so the informed consent was adapted in a google form (which can be found in the Appendix).

### **Data analysis**

Research questions focused on participants' understanding of meanings and social life in the particular context of having participated in UiD Dialogue events and the data were analyzed inductively. This procedure allowed analysis of the relations between meanings, in this case between social polarization, social inclusion and the usefulness and usage of the Dialogue methodology. As a piece of information related to the main concepts were noted, it was

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compared against other corresponding pieces of information from the other interviews for similarities and differences. The resulting concepts were labeled, and over time, they are compared and grouped (Corbin, Strauss, 1990). Making comparisons assisted in guarding against bias (challenging concepts with fresh data), assisted achieving greater precision (the grouping of similar and only similar phenomena) and consistency (always grouping like with like) (Corbin, Strauss, 1990).

The process of analysis started begins before all the data are collected. AmberScript was used to transform the recordings to transcripts and then to improve the accuracy all transcriptions were checked manually for missing parts and corrections in order to be precise. The observations of each interview were systematically recorded in field notes manually. While reading through each interview, the answers where the main research question and sub questions were answered were noted, which enables not losing the answers in their context that were said.

Each transcript was read thoroughly in its entirety. Later, an intensive data analysis started when all data had been collected. The aim at this stage was to use the data to look whether any interesting patterns can be identified (Mohajan, 2018). These emerging patterns were identified as they seem to reflect the research question and the literature reviewed. Open coding was the first step, as it is a way of identifying important words, or groups of words, in the data, and then labeling them accordingly. As the data analysis continues these patterns begin to be developed into a number of thematic categories of description. Each transcript then was examined closely for phrases, sentences or paragraphs, such as participant quotes, which stand out as central to the broader area of interest, which is the perception of dialogue usefulness.

Axial coding was needed at the latter portions of open coding as major categories emerged from the data. Axial coding was needed to investigate the relationships between concepts and categories that have been developed in the open coding process (Vollstedt, & Rezat, 2019).

All research data including interview audios, transcripts and declaration of consent will be uploaded to 'YoDa' and permanently deleted from personal computers and possible connected clouds, following the official recommendation from Utrecht University to keep participants data safe.

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## Findings

In this chapter the main results will be presented. Three sections will follow, corresponding to each sub-question that gives all the valuable information to answer the main research question.

### Perception of Dialogues

How is the process of the dialogues being perceived by the participants based on their own experience? This question corresponds to notions of how each participant is personally connected with UiD event's and methodology. What is a Dialogue for each individual and which are the identifying elements that constitute a Dialogue for them in the first place?

After analysing and comparing all the given answers, a great majority of the participants who had only participated in one Dialogue event and even specifically an online one, would underline that it's a space to share their experience and not be challenged, judged or commented on for their choices and ideas. Rather they think is a space to be listen to and listen to others perspectives regarding the same theme. This fact showcases how on their specific Dialogue event the Ground Rules made a vivid impression on new participants, comparing to the rest that had gotten accustomed to and didn't mention it that heavily.

With the most element mentioned among participants, emphasis was put on that Dialogues create a space that they can interact with people that otherwise they could not encounter, from different part of the city (or the country and the world if it is an online Dialogue). This fact is placing **location** and **accessibility** in the frontline of factors, as if it was in a specific place like an already defined class or accessible only by car this wouldn't be the case. Location and accessibility is important factors as not all individual gave the means or the to reach any location and building.

Other factors reported were the **absence of commentary and judgment**, which are in most cases interconnected. No one can (in an implicit or explicit way) force a negative connotation to sayings if they cannot comment whether they agree or not to what they hear and thus no judgment is being felt by participants. Other participants can still ask questions in order to dive in to each story, but they are not welcomed to share recommendation or suggestions, as this would imply that they know better than the narrator about their own lives, which from one participants point of view is a sign of polarisation in society and this is not the point of the Dialogue event. This way, participants named 'safe space' the absence of retorts from the group,

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as they would face from their friends, family or in work environment. At least in Dialogue events case, even if someone was internally disagreeing with their choices, they wouldn't express it and therefore make anyone to feel threatened or cornered by it.

*'I would describe it as like it's like a **kind of discussion, but without the discussing part, like you just listen to each other, but you don't... answer or comment on somebody**'.*

*Participant15, male / Dutch/ youth*

*'It's not really about challenging, **but it's more about constructively understanding other person's perspective. It's how I see it. And I think that is also an interesting concept because now everything is very polarized**'.*

*Participant10, male / Expat / youth*

Connected to the next sub-question, some participants put more emphasis on the structure of the dialogue itself, it's guidance from the trained facilitator and **methodology** on how it is facilitated, organised and executed. Participants that are part of UiD and have participated in multiple Dialogue events value more the existence of Ground Rules and their self-perceived impact on participants, as an irreplaceable part of the experience because they give Dialogues a direction and a purpose.

*'And it's **not a random exchange**. There is a **formula** to it. And once we've agreed on this formula, we can then have a dialogue.'*

*Participant14, Female / Expat / youth*

### **Methodology against polarisation**

Concerning Dialogues' methodology usefulness in reducing the symptoms of social polarization within class, participants provided a wide range of answers. One perspective was that it is an appropriate tool to create the mutual ground to talk about polarizing topics like immigration and gun violence, exactly because it provides an equality between participants in the same room. In a typical Dialogue event, participants are welcomed to share how they connect with the subject

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and why they chose to participate, but it is not necessarily asked to present themselves, which consequently leads to people not creating stereotypical expectations or unconsciously opposing further labels on fellow participants. This is what creates the reported 'equality' between participants. On the contrary, when one of the participants tried using the Dialogue methodology in an educational setting like a university extra curriculum activity, he reported that it was more difficult to achieve this equality, as participants clinched to positions of 'professors' and 'just students. Knowledge in this way is unintentionally weaponized, leading to imbalance in **power dynamics**, the **weight of each opinions** and the **legitimacy of their argumentation**. This has as an outcome for educators to find it harder to motivate students and colleagues to not think about their own positionality within a certain hierarchy.

Another dimension coming to support the idea that the Dialogue' methodology can be used in the educational field in **decision making** around practical issues university students face, like student council's discussion on fees or with the exams that are in need of change. In these cases, it is stated that a Dialogue would be a better format for voicing their opinions.

### **The methodology for social inclusion**

All three Dutch young participants referring to their universities experiences claimed that they do not see any problem in terms of social inclusion, or social polarization for that matter, in contrast to what expats and international students had to say on the subject. This means that even if they like the methodology that is used in the Dialogues, they don't believe it is needed in their curriculum in order to improve their student lives. College life was labeled as different from high school life (participant9, *female, Dutch, youth*) and that everybody, international and Dutch students, are getting along without any conflict (participant15, *male, Dutch, youth* and Participant13, *female, Dutch, youth*). To whether absence of conflict equals social inclusion, the reactions were mixed with different participants giving opposing answers. The common point among their ideas is that at least it appears that people tolerate, if not respect, the differences among people with specific reference to religious beliefs (participant13 and participant15). To the same participants, mentioning high school experiences, made the conversation to shift. Issues like bullying for different psychical characteristics, feeling of loneliness and a sense of not belonging, being



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segregated from others are situations that they have seen happening in their former school environment, and that brought their answers in the same track as the ones from expats and international students. This way, most of the participants think Dialogues could be used in favor of social inclusion, as teachers and other students would hear the person's story and the person would feel more as part of the group and integrated.

From the other side, some opposition came from a participant who proposed that using Dialogues in favor of social inclusion in schools *"It's like using the wrong tool for the job"* (participant14) and that dialogues may be not the most efficient tool in order to address the problem in the best way, as *'sort of obscures the bigger context' (female/ Expat/ youth)*. This opinion is based on the fact that the methodology of dialogues maybe is more beneficial when working with individuals, because it really forces you to think about the needs of that particular person. In education, the examples of children having 'family obstacles' or 'attention deficiencies' were brought up to showcase issues that have to be addressed in an individual level. This individual approach, as the participant explained, is focusing on one person at the time and trying to sort out their individual issues, which at the same time takes the attention away from the 'bigger picture', greater problems that this person is immersed in, that as a society and teachers we may not be addressing. According to this pinion, Dialogue's methodology is definitely a good tool for improvement, for introducing improvement plans and trying to understand the context and why things are happening the way they're happening, but sometimes it really obscures this bigger context. When in Dialogue, everyone is focusing on the experience and are actually not supposed to talk about third party experiences but rather focus on themselves and the first hand experiences of the people who are present. This core characteristic could backfire leading to overestimate 'the value of a single tree while losing sight of the forest'. Examples were given on systemic oppression of women and how for instance Dutch females could no longer see the pattern, but only individual incidents, of sexism in the local and international society and reality. This is why if Dialogues' methodology is being used alone as a tool in education, could potentially obscure positive improvements for social inclusion in the macro-level, as it only focuses on the micro-level of society.

In the same line of thought doubting Dialogues' methodology application, came another perspective that focuses on Academia. A second Dialogue characteristic that could backfire in a university setting is that in research and science, improvements are happening through

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challenging one's ideas, principal directly opposite to a Dialogue event's spirit. A participant who works as tutor in students' groups proposed that Dialogues could be used as mental health support instead and with personal development in mind, but not directly in scientific discussions, as there the goal is to challenge colleagues to hold them accountable and with the goal of moving scientific knowledge further (participant10). This leads to the implication that some sciences, as those that orbit around math and psychics for example, don't provide the same opportunities as humanities and social sciences could.

*'From a scientific perspective, I think the format of dialogue is perhaps not the best. Because Science is all about challenging one's opinion and perhaps in a dialogue that is not necessarily there. So I think in terms of the work to do the research work, dialogue is probably not very useful. But in terms of how people are feeling as part of the group. For instance what they are going through in terms of mental health, from a personal development perspective and not necessarily from a scientific perspective'.*

*Participant10, male/ Expat/ youth*

Directly opposing to this belief, another participant supports the idea that in these faculties a form of Dialogue is valuable, as in his personal experience in university this was included in his course named 'Bioethics' (participant16). Always there are ethical dilemmas that can be discussed without necessarily having to debate about it, but listen to what other colleagues believe on certain topics such as euthanasia, abortion, healthcare for all etcetera.

Moving to other insights concerning the usefulness of Dialogues in the classroom, different possible outcomes from Dialogue usage can be awareness of the issue of segregation to both parents and students and making individuals reflect on their own idea of how 'open-minded' and inclusive they think they are. The notion of awareness was brought up in tries of a participant to illustrate why we don't have social inclusion to begin with, not only why it is not manifesting itself in schools. It is proposed that is a symptom of the (racial) segregation in neighbourhoods that can be seen both in USA and in the Netherlands, which is also visible in how schools are segregated in 'white' and 'black' schools. In this line of thought even saying

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that education is 'striving for social inclusion' is a paradox, as it is implied that there is always a group that is excluding others and thus by having Dialogues we can raise awareness on the subject. The awareness has to be raised as soon as possible and to be not limited to students, as is suggested that everything starts with how parents behave and teach their children or live by example. Parents can be included in Dialogues from the school, along with other parents, teachers or the students themselves. It is important to highlight that this is not mentioned as a panacea to social inclusion, as the reality of it being a complicated, multi-layered issue has to be recognised.

*'(Exclusion) it's a symptom of what's happening outside of the school. I don't think it's possible at that point to make people **feel comfortable**, but maybe is a time to educate people and create awareness. **So I think could be potentially used as a tool of awareness.** Using it as awareness at any at any stage, I think. And when the kids are young you do want a diverse classroom. But how do you get that? **You can only get that by making the parents more aware.** But there's so many problems that this is one aspect. So I think it's good to be **realistic about this being one aspect.** So it could be used as a **tool**, but there are other things going on'.*

*Participant3, female/ Expat/ educator*

The last relevant insight that was harvested and stated above is that Dialogues can be used in educational institutions like universities by means to let their students check their privileged and authentically reflect on their personal biases and prejudices. Liberal or left-wing students will have the possibility of facing how tolerant and respectful they are and which tools have been using until now: negatively stereotyping and looking down on politically conservative people and the idea of not engaging in any conversation with them 'because they are stupid' is according to participant16 a clear symptom of social polarization and a reason why social inclusion cannot be realized if empathetic conversations (with Dialogues being a form of them) and active listening do not become the mainstream norm.

*'I think the problem we really have is that most of the time when we think about other groups of people, **it's in the abstract.** So it's you might not actually know anyone from a*

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*certain community, **but you still talk about them** like just in conversation. So someone says to you, oh, you know, an Islamic extremist. I don't know any. I've never met any. I've never seen one in person. But we'll talk about them. (...) **It's kind of the real test of, yeah, how open or how inclusive are you?** I think it cuts both ways because it's also for people like us who it's a pretty liberal and we think a very open minded is probably **still something that would make you uncomfortable and you don't want to admit it. Maybe I'm actually not as tolerant as I thought I was.***

*Participant16, male/ Expat/ youth*

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## Discussion

Main objective of this research was to investigate whether participants of UiD believe that structured dialogues incorporated in education could help alleviate the consequences of social polarization in ideas and foster a sense of social inclusion. The importance of this answer lies in providing a practical tool to educators and students with the goal of abandoning their hesitance to address polarizing topics in class. Potential use of 'Dialogues', as they have been formulated from Utrecht in Dialogo could assist in inclusion of every students in school life (of any educational level) and thus this research focused on the perceptions of young adults and educators on the application and usefulness of these Dialogues' methodology.

Regarding the main research topic of Dialogue usefulness, a plethora of different opinions was received fluctuating from 'not really helpful' to 'it's essential', fact not so surprising after the detailed debriefing of the data above. Among the explanations in favour of the usefulness of the methodology, the analysis and comparison between the results illustrates two main interconnected pillars: people-oriented and goal-oriented perspectives. These narratives don't follow a specific model, but constitutes a category that helped the analysis and answers the main research question in the best way.

In this spirit, people-oriented lining explanations on why the methodology is useful the way it is, included labels such as **strategy** to keep everyone engaged, a **way** to focus on people's experience, get rid of prejudice and get in contact with people, stories and perspectives that otherwise they wouldn't.

Goal-oriented lining explanations, which were the dominant ones, stressed a lot more points regarding guidance and structure in order to reach a conclusion/step in the end of each Dialogue. The worlds 'flow' and 'rhythm' were used to describe the way the Dialogues are being built and facilitated throughout the process of the event. The main opinions were that the specific methodology takes the theme, which often seems kind of vague and abstract and makes it definite and real. It is also highlighted that it empowers its participants and enables people to act upon realising their ultimate goals and dream reality that they envisioned in the previous phase.

From the other hand, there were also interesting insights from participants that justified why they think the Dialogue methodology is not the most appropriate one in all cases. While the benefits of facilitating conversations on controversial issues are being affirmed from the literature, there is less agreement on which issues are legitimate topics for school classrooms

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(Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). The findings correspond to that, too, as participants provided arguments that include the appropriation of the theme combined with the different phases and the Ground Rules of the Dialogues. If the general attitude is so focused on positivity, this could undermine feelings of individuals that are not positive at the moment or experience other still expected, valid and human emotions. Some of the topics that directly or indirectly touch sensitive and personal areas of a person's life, such as forms of systemic oppression (racism and police brutality, sexism and gender violence, incidents of genocides or wars etc) don't lend themselves particularly well to a structured dialogue that has to aim at some sort of affirmation and some sort of action. This idea was supported with the argumentation that not everyone can't frame every single issue or every single experience that people have had in one that might lead to some positive outcome.

Furthermore, after many reported cases in different countries that teachers got suspended, sued or fired only because they screen a documentary or open a debate on a controversial or polarizing topic, teachers are more reluctant to have an honest and open conversation around burning social issues that are being discussed in the public sphere (Evans, Avery & Pederson, 2000). According to Hess and Gati (2010) teachers might fear that politics are too dangerous and polarizing for students and teachers to discuss in the classroom and therefore all types of taboo topic discussions are avoided (Hess & Gati, 2010). Regarding to that, the participants of this research put great importance on the **relevance** of the subject/theme. Even if the dialogue methodology gets be applied to any subject, the level of relevance to the students' lives has to be explicitly stated and the connections have to be made. With this being said, the implications that some present social issues directly can have in the students' lives have to be taken under consideration with great importance. Participants gave examples that they wished to be discussed in class such as experiments on animals, euthanasia etc, but also specifically in the Netherlands such as farmers demonstrations and the Black Pete debate. Schools should provide an environment where students build deep knowledge about important controversies facing the political sphere of their country and learn how to talk and disagree in ways that are inclusive and productive (Hess & Gati, 2010).

Continuing on argumentation against Dialogue's application in class, participants argued that **debates** would be more useful than 'Dialogues' in some topics, as it makes people look for the 'why' behind beliefs, starting challenging them and building argumentation. Another

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downfall of Dialogues that participants stretched was on how ready someone is to act upon their dreams. Most people might not be able to change some feature of their life and response to that right there at that moment. Also, because the dialogue structure has this built the 'don't give advice' as one of the Ground Rules, when the dialogue does not encourage advices, maybe changes or connections cannot happen within participants. Most of the times what is really helpful about sharing plans with other people is that they can give you advice, but in Dialogues is not about that, so then the value is reduced.

Finally, in regard of highly unexpected, but highly significant results, participants of the same Dialogues and even with the same background (for example educators or expats) had on most cases a completely opposite perspective on the usage and usefulness of Dialogues. This fact demonstrates that people with matching profiles are still individuals that cannot be stereotyped and can offer a plethora of valuable insights. Educators were mostly more critical against the methodology used in Dialogue events than young participants, which was expected due to the nature of their occupation. A positive relation between participants with greater experience in Dialogues and more supportive positions on the usefulness of dialogues in educational settings was expected, but something like that was not supported or verified by the results.

### **Limitations**

The main limitations of the research can be listed as two: A) Dialogue was a misleading term, B) Fears of biased sampling. The first limitation was that the terminology of 'Dialogues' even if it was clearly stated that is referred to the specific one that is executed by UiD, still even participants with extended experience were keep on talking generic or were double checking often if they understand correctly. Some particular participants raised their concerns about it, stating that that the notion of dialogue is broad, capacious and thus hard to do any sort of evaluation in them.

The second possible identifiable weakness of the study is regarding the sample. Even if it was as randomized as possible, still the individuals who responded to the call for participants were people that personally know me or had come in contact before (19/20), with joining after a friend recommended them to do it, with 8 naming or referring to me personally as for the reason they got in contact with Utrecht in Dialoog altogether. It is assumed that this fact couldn't be avoided as the participation was voluntary and didn't influence the validity of the research

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overall, but maybe there are implications such as many like-minded people participated with the outcome of limiting the variety of insights in their answers.

### **Implications for professional practice**

A more practical guide for educators and schools that wish to incorporate UiD's Dialogues in their curriculum or activities will follow as recommendation. The list combines the literature discussed, the organisation's guidelines and summing up all participants comments on the usefulness of the Dialogue's methodology and how can be adjusted in the needs of any class. All the above data are illustrated as a combination of factors that play role such as the following.

**Interaction** between participants but also with the facilitator/teacher. The relationship between teacher and students has to be based on mutual respect in order for the students to trust the process and take the activity seriously. Being in a Dialogue required a level of vulnerability which cannot be present if their relationship is strained.

**Ground rules** that will be decided and respected by everyone. Having Ground Rules as a group (groups like a team, a class, a school unit) is of great importance to create a feeling of safety and accountability among the participating students. Having not only the responsibility of obeying them, but also being engaged in the process of brainstorming about them and finally selecting the most important ones is a bright example of including students in their own learning process, which is leading to be more willing to trust the process and take the activity seriously, even if they don't particularly like the teacher/facilitator. This way they are active actors and not just passive helpless members.

**Teachers training, experience and background** in dealing with controversial topics: having the academic or/and empirical knowledge and experience of facing possible conflicts, heated arguments or tension around certain discussions and how to deescalate them is essential feature in case the other two above factors are partially incomplete or missing. Expecting and accepting the fact that the individuals may take specific things personally is part of the process of having these type of discussions in class.

**Introduction** of the activity. A well-structured introduction to the theme (which step is also included in Dialogue events) can assist greatly in the process of finding a personal connection with the theme in order to have the most impact in broadening horizons and being interesting enough to keep the level of engagement.



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The creation of '**safe space**' within the given group. This last criterion is the trickiest one as it can be said that it combines most of the above. Even in rare cases where the teachers doesn't have specific training regarding facilitation, that she/he is new to the class and this or the school is strict in having specific general rules laid out, still the feeling of safe space can be achieved by reinforcing the idea that there are no 'bad' and 'good' emotions and on human feeling and reaction should be automatically demonized. The feeling of being free to express themselves in order to understand them in absence of authority punishment, peer shame or internal guilt is being built slowly, but surely leads to safe space for any type of dialogue

### **Recommendations for further research**

Lastly, it has to be commented that even if all the above criteria are being met in an educational setting, as far as it concerns if the outcomes can be visible, we cannot discuss about the long term. We haven't seen longitudinal changes over time in any specific cohort of people because we haven't been doing it consistently in a classroom environment. Further research has to be done after the application of such methodology, the opinions of the students and teachers themselves that experienced it first hand in class, as well as possible of effects of consistent Dialogue methodology usage in later years.

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## Appendices

### A. The four steps of a Dialogue and the main questions

1. A dialogue starts with getting to know each other. You give your name and your first associations with the theme and what it means to you. The next step is to discuss the dialogue rules and share where you are good at?
2. You share experiences. Tell about a personal experience you had recently around the theme. Describe visually what happened: where, with whom, what did you see, what did you do? Ask in depth questions so that you get a clear picture of the other's experience. Furthermore you can expand on the positive associations with the theme. Maybe there is something the experiences have in common?
3. You dream together. What does your desired or ideal future look like in relation to the theme? Can you describe this image? What do you see, hear and feel?
4. Together you brainstorm about what you can do to reach your ideal future. How can you bring your dream closer? What is the first concrete step that you can take?

### B. Dialogue Ground Rules

1. **Open your heart.** Please put off judgment as long as possible. For a good dialogue, we need to resist some of our natural conversation habits. Like many Dutch women used to wear aprons over their skirts. When they mopped the floors, they had to "suspend their skirts" so they did not get in the way. The same applies for a good dialogue. You need to suspend judgment so it does not get in the way. So you won't trip over it. Only then you can look beyond your own set views.
2. **Please be brief.** Speak frankly and in depth without getting long winded. If we make a clear point, interesting differences become visible, and our views become clear.
3. **Open your mind.** Listen respectfully to all contributed views. All participants in a dialogue are equal and deserve equal respect. Don't think *against* the other ("Yes, but..."-attitude). Think *with* the others and ask clarifying questions.

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4. **Feel free.** This is about finding answers together and about asking new questions. It is not at all about individual performance. Please make room for new thinking. Go beyond your old thinking, beyond opinions and views.
5. **Let the other person shine.** Invite others to tell while you listen. To be in dialogue means you listen with all your attention and appreciation. And that you are willing to share experiences. Take your time.
6. **Be curious.** Strive to understand, not to persuade. Listen actively. Put yourself in the other's place. Look at the world through the other's eyes. Be open to the other's story.
7. **Go for discovery.** Let go of presumptions, go for new insights. Don't try and find solutions. Explore underlying reasons, norms and values. Discover the views behind a problem or solution.
8. **Be real.** Speak from your heart about personal experiences, not just your opinion. Anyone can express their opinions and feelings. You speak for yourself. Openly and honestly.

## C. Overview of participants

Participant	Sex	Relation with the Netherlands	Category
1	Female	Expat	Educator
2	Female	Expat	Youth
3	Female	Expat	Educator
4	Female	Online dialogues	Educator
5	Female	International Student	Educator
6	Female	Online dialogues	Youth
7	Female	Online dialogues	Educator

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8	Female	Expat	Youth
9	Female	Dutch	Youth
10	Male	Expat	Youth
11	Male	Expat	Educator
12	Male	Online dialogues	Educator
13	Female	Dutch	Youth
14	Female	Expat	Youth
15	Male	Dutch	Youth
16	Male	Expat	Youth
17	Male	Dutch	Youth
18	Female	Expat	Educator
19	Male	Expat	Youth
20	Female	Dutch	Educator

Commented [AS1]: What does this mean?

**D. Interview guide**

1. When did you get in contact with Utrecht in Dialogue and how? For how long have you been active or in which way?
2. What made you come for the first time in a Dialogue (or keep coming to others)?
3. If you had to explain to someone that never participated in an Utrecht in Dialogue's event, with your own words how you would describe what is happening in a Dialogue?



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4. How did you find the methodology of the three different phases: sharing, dreaming, acting? Was it helpful for you and in which way? (If no, what in your opinion is the main reason for that?)
5. In a more general sense now, do you think that polarisation is an issue in the Netherlands (or/and the country you grew up?). If yes, how did you personally experience it? If no, which is your own interpretation of social polarization as a topic.
6. What does the term 'social inclusion' mean to you?
7. What about social inclusion in education/ a school setting? Would your answer be different and how?
8. Thinking of your education (or your job as an educator), would using Dialogues in some form be effective in reducing polarization between students? (In which way from your perspective? Under which circumstances?)
9. Taking it a step further, what about encouraging inclusion within the classroom? Why do you think that would be (or not) possible through the dialogue methodology?
10. If not in the classroom, that would be possible in other settings in your opinion and why?
11. Would you personally use Dialogues or wish that Dialogues were included in your curriculum/schedule? Either yes or no, please share with me your reasons.

## **E. Online consent form**

### **'The impressions of Dialogues and their educational use'**

By means of this form, I would like you to review the conditions of your participation in the research project 'The impressions of Dialogues and their educational use'. It can be used instead of signing the letter attached in the original invitation email to validate your informed consent on participating in the research.

### **Introduction: Purpose and background of the study**

The purpose of this study is to document how young participants of Dialogues or participants related to the educational field experience dialogues, the potential usage of Dialogues as an educational tool and the self-perceived benefits that Dialogues could have on minimizing social polarisation and maximizing social inclusion.

Background of the study:

This study is conducted as a part of Master's program 'Youth, Education and Society' (Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences) of Utrecht University. The researcher, Maria

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Chatzidionysiou is a student from Greece with a Bachelor in Early School Education and currently she is having her internship in Utrecht in Dialog (Utrecht, the Netherlands). Her chosen track within her Masters is 'Inclusive Societies' and this very research serves the role of identifying the prospects of using Utrecht in Dialogues' methodology as an educational tool.

What is expected of you as a participant

The interviews will be conducted in English language, once, individually with the researcher, and online via zoom. The only criteria to participate is to have participated at least in one (live or online) Dialogue the last one year. The interview will be approximately 30 minutes and the conversation will be recorded in order to analyse the information later. No preparation or other forms of workload is required before or after the interview.

**I was aware of the purpose, background and expectations of my participation before my interview**

Yes

No

### **Confidentiality and data processing**

This specific study doesn't require much of your identifiable personal data (like home addresses, details on marital status etc) in order to be able to answer the research question properly or to be able to contact you for follow-up research. The personal data that will be stored though (names and email addresses) will remain confidential and will be anonymized whenever possible before being stored. Only the researcher involved can access the data.

The data gathered from the interviews will be stored for at least 7 years, as it typically happens for any Master thesis. This is in accordance with the guidelines provided by the VSNU Association of Universities in the Netherlands. Please refer to the website of the Authority for Personal Data: <https://autoriteitpersoonsgegevens.nl/nl/onderwerpen/avg-europese-privacywetgeving>, for more information about privacy.

Voluntary participation

Participation in this study is voluntary and there will be no money compensation. You can end your participation in the study at any time, without any explanation and without any negative consequences. If you end your participation, we will use the data collected up to that point, unless you explicitly inform us otherwise.

**I have read and I am aware of the confidentiality and data processing about my privacy concerning my participation**

Yes

No

### **Consent statement**

In case of any questions regarding the research you can always contact the main researcher Maria Chatzidionysiou at: [m.chatzidionysiou@students.uu.nl](mailto:m.chatzidionysiou@students.uu.nl)

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If you have any extraordinary comments about the study that you wish not to address to the main researcher, please contact Wilma de Buck through [info@utrechtindialog.nl](mailto:info@utrechtindialog.nl)

If you have an official complaint about the study, you can send an email to the complaints officer at [klachtenfunctionaris-fetcsocwet@uu.nl](mailto:klachtenfunctionaris-fetcsocwet@uu.nl)

**I hereby declare that I have read all the above information about the 'The impressions of Dialogues and their educational use' study of Maria Chatzidionysiou and validate my participation in the study**

Yes

No

Full name\*:

Email\*:

Date\*:

Comments: