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ZOOM IN & ZOOM OUT! AUTHENTIC DIALOGUE IN REMOTE TEACHING?

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Abstract

Literature indicates that authentic dialogue can play an essential role in the social and emotional development of young children. In the classroom settings, it enables the children to speak their minds on topics that are relevant to them in an intimate face to face conversation, without the fear of being judged through an imbalance of power by an authoritative figure, the teacher. Dialogue time is often deprived during the teaching process, most often due to an increasing demand for advancing academic skills, leaving children to focus on pleasing their teachers with the answers that are considered desirable rather than focusing on matters that are perceived as important to them. This theoretical paper introduces and discusses various definitions of dialogue dating back to Plato up to the 21st century description of classroom dialogue, known as dialogic pedagogy. Moreover, it addresses the manner in which the Covid-19 worldwide pandemic has changed teacher-child dialogue, the implications of these changes on young children and their parents. It aims to describe the complexities of conducting authentic dialogue with preschoolers in the virtual world via a computer screen and to offer recommendations based on the reviewed studies.

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1. Introduction

This paper introduces and discusses various definitions of dialogue throughout history and its relationship to dialogic pedagogy in the educational system. Long (2013) clarifies the Greek philosopher, Plato's definition of the term dialogue as being something different than just people speaking to each other through questions and answers as it is very often viewed. The etymology of the concept indicates that the word dialogue consists of two parts, "dia" meaning "through" and "logos" meaning "words" (Long, 2013). In order for a dialogue to take place, the participants must be able to show an interest in the others words and make a genuine effort to understand the meanings of the words, not from a linguistic perspective but rather than if they were going through their thoughts and not just listening to their words. Through the use of dialogue, the participants are going through a thought process that will better enhance all involved. Although it is a common word, in order for it to be used in a broad and unlimited fashion, it needs to be examined as something other than an exchange of words between people or a negotiation of intellectual points of view. Hence, dialogue is a process of shared thinking and mutual understanding that is expressed either in consent or in explained opposition; conversation without mutual understanding is not considered a dialogue (Leibovitch, 1957).

Friedman (2002) presents in a reflective manner the idea of the philosopher, Martin Buber, best known for his philosophy of dialogue, who claimed that an individual is capable of achieving self-realization through the process of dialogue. At the core of this process lies the notion that all the persons involved in dialogue view each other as unique and separate entities, which enable all of them to reach personal development. In turn, dialogue is about creating something new between the individuals involved, creating personal interactions, which did not exist before. This interaction is known as "I and you", therefore dialogue is construed in a social context rather than just a linguistic one. Each person involved attempts to address the needs, thoughts and feelings of the significant other from a nonjudgmental point of view (Friedman, 2002). The investigation and the discoveries that will take place in the dialogue are expected to be democratic and egalitarian and not hierarchical, where one dominates the space and sees him/ herself as having more power over of the other (Friedman, 2002).

More than ninety years after Buber first described the meaning and the importance of dialogue, Alexander (2006) described the term dialogue as being a social connection where the participants engage in a process of developing relationships that require mutual respect, trust and concern, and it is not as often referred to as a communicative form of questions and answers. Peled-Elhanan and Blum-Kulka (2006) define dialogue as a space that people create in order to attempt to understand the differences between them and explore the possible similarities, in order to bring them closer together and allow for personal development. During this process, the participants avoid impulsive responses which come from being judgmental and their reactions are based on thinking before speaking (Peled-Elhanan & Blum-Kulka, 2006). This enables everyone involved to pay close attention to the needs of others rather than be preoccupied with themselves. Game and Metcalfe (2009) claim that dialogue is not only a mutual space that is created by the participants, rather a place that all involved can experience their thoughts in a manner that could not be experienced on their own.

1.1. Ground theories of dialogical approach

Several dialogical definitions have discussed in the previous paragraphs, allowing the understanding of dialogue as being more than just people speaking to each other. As Alexander (2008) argues, partners involved in dialogue see each other's as equals, and are in constant desire to attain insights into each other's inner personal thoughts, this in turn creates interpersonal relationships. A deeper form of dialogue, termed authentic dialogue, is defined as the creation of open and honest spaces in which diverse perspectives are valued and ambiguity is accepted and not rejected (Strickland & Marinak, 2015). Within the authentic dialogue space, multiple voices are encouraged in order to enable personal stories to be heard. This in turn allows the participants to ask new authentic questions, search for new authentic answers in order to reach mutual understandings between them (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2007).

Authentic dialogue is grounded in Habermas' model of rational communication, which has four conditions (Hollander, 2011). The first, *sincerity*, is achieved by face-to-face encounters allowing for legitimate and genuine intentions to be exhibited. The second, *comprehensibility*, refers to the fact that all participants must fully understand the language spoken and the content being discussed must be coherent. The third, *interpretation*, means that there must be a balance of power so that information will be accessible to all and questions may be asked without fear of judgment from others. The fourth, *normative acceptance*, means that everything anyone says can be scrutinized without fear of the manipulation of power by a certain individual, that might diminish the participants desire to engage in the process.

Grandy and Holton (2013) explain the effectiveness of this model in that the dialogue must be a joint effort of all involved and their mutual goal is to find answers to the matters at hand through uninhibited speech, which is at the core of this model. This will result in a sense of trust, competence and self-worth for all participants. Raelin (2016) discusses how Habermas's model can be applied to any organization that values collaborative work and describes how authentic dialogue can contribute to the success of any organization. Hence, one such example is that of the health care consortiums in the United States that involve students, doctors, nurses, administrators and technical support teams. They brainstorm and pool resources together in order to improve healthcare projects for patients while displaying sincerity, coherence, equality, free speech while avoiding judgmental comments. These conditions, that are at the core of authentic dialogue process, advanced the health care programs in an enormous fashion (Raelin, 2016)

1.2. Authentic dialogue in education

The role that authentic dialogue plays in education is of great importance for building a meaningful educational climate. Vygotsky's (1986) social constructivist theory places development and learning processes in a social context, claiming that through social interactions, cognitive development can be successfully achieved. The author further goes on to explain that when learning is child-centered, both teachers and children share their knowledge and claim ownership of their own voices as part of the learning process. A teacher must encourage and promote dialogue with children in order for them to feel as equals in their learning process. A child's interactions with his/her peers and the teacher in the classroom is what gives him/her a sense of emotional security and social wellbeing.

Bakhtin (2010), in his theory of dialogism, explains that authentic dialogue transpires when two people are in communion, giving and receiving messages for the purposes of creating a relationship. Inclusion occurs when those engaged in dialogue acknowledge all available points of view and perspectives while asking thoughtful open-ended questions. Authentic dialogue occurs when participants open spaces that encourage active listening, awareness of another's needs as well as reciprocal responses. This type of dialogue enables each individual to seek meaning in the content spoken while viewing himself with regard to others. Teachers and children that engage in authentic dialogues that include multiple voices in the pursuit of understanding and exposing personal stories, found that new questions are formed and new meanings are constructed (Bakhtin, 2010).

Unfortunately, most of the classrooms around the world look and function as they did throughout history. Teacher-child interactions are still following the traditional style of teaching known as "IRE", i.e., initiation, reply and evaluation (Mehan & Cazden, 2015). The teacher initiates a topic, the children reply to the topic being taught and are then evaluated by the teacher as to the responses expected to hear. The teacher dominates the discourse and children's voices are only heard when they need to respond to the questions at hand, leaving them no space to actively participate in the dialogue (Mehan & Cazden, 2015). Strickland and Marinak (2015) explain that when the teachers voice is heard throughout most of the dialogue and the child's voice is constrained, spaces are closed and prove uninviting for children's participation. Hence, the way teachers view the use of classroom dialogue will either support or interfere with the way children learn (Mercer, 2019). Teachers need to acknowledge that in order for a successful learning process to take place, children's voices must be equally heard and classrooms need to shift from traditional dialogue to a more authentic one.

Peled-Elhanan and Blum-Kulka (2006) coined the concept called "teaching control", which is an instinctive control seen in most of the classrooms from preschool to universities, and it is characterized by a philosophical belief that students develop best by external conditions, meaning that they are influenced and shaped by their environment. In other words, their inherent, internal potential is not given enough credit therefore teachers see themselves as responsible to choose how the children will behave and learn in order to succeed. In addition, teachers might feel an obligation to stop inappropriate behaviors at all costs because they believe that children are not able to self-regulate themselves. Little attention is given to the thoughts, feelings, and preferences of the children because historically, education is a hierarchical system where teachers have all the power and children are there to learn from the teacher's wisdom (Nystrand et al., 2003). Adults are seen as more experienced in instructional matters and are therefore in control of all that goes on in the classroom. Researchers have noted that the increasing focus on testing and accountability limits time for dialogue and deprives learners of the opportunity for meaningful communication (McNally & Slutsky, 2018).

Peled-Elhanan and Blum-Kulka (2006) state that teachers who promote authentic dialogue, create an environment in which they listen attentively to the children, encourage different points of view, open spaces for questions, which is respected and not seen as intimidating for the teacher. This allows children to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgement. Nystrand et al. (2003) describe this space as a *positive interaction area* where children participate because they find an interest in what others have to say, resulting in new questions and a desire to discover new answers in a collaborate manner.

Dialogical pedagogy is a term used to describe a teacher's role in supporting, encouraging and incorporating children's questions, thoughts and ideas into classroom conversations; this pedagogy prepares children with problem solving tools and promotes curiosity and creativity (Sylva et al., 2010). It is considered that the teacher needs to let the children feel that what they say, means a great deal, which will in turn lead to internal motivation and a desire to be active participants in classroom dialogue. In addition, the teacher needs to inhibit her natural teaching control instinct by learning to pause and not react immediately enabling the children to express themselves without necessarily basing their comments on the topic at hand. This could lead to the formation of new topics that are more relevant to the child's world and in turn can become part of the classroom curriculum. The feedback that the children receive from their teachers should be verbal and nonverbal, which will in turn promote closeness and quality interactions (Rentzou & Sakellariou, 2011). The skills that a child internalizes through this type of learning, it is expected to have a long-term effect on their personal lives, boosting their self-confidence, their feeling of competence, making them feel unique, productive and continue to develop in a meaningful way (Flecha, 2000).

1.3. Global challenges to dialogic practices in classrooms: Remote teaching

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the world in so many ways, that researchers in various fields have not even begun to touch the surface of how people's lives have been changed and will continue to change for an indefinite amount of time. UNESCO (2020) reports that over 1.5 billion students worldwide have been affected due to the closure of schools during the pandemic. COVID-19 caught everyone in the educational industry by surprise, challenging teachers' abilities to conduct lessons remotely as well as the principal's leadership skills in forming educational policies adapted for online studies. However, most of all these changes appeared to have heavily challenged the early childhood educators around the world, not because they had little or no experience in teaching remotely, but due to the fact that they base their practice on the principle that young children need face to face personal relationships with their teachers and friends in order to experience significant learning.

Young children experience learning via their basic five senses and are not developmentally capable of understanding abstract terms rather only concrete ones (Williams & Kamii, 1986). Their teachers scaffold their learning, both socially and emotionally through dialogue, unfortunately, the pandemic prevents these interactions. In addition, the OECD (2020) reports that parents are also under a great deal of pandemic related stress, such as health worries and employment issues and find it difficult to function because their anxiety levels are so high. Most often, they cannot seek help from their most natural support groups such as grandparents or other close family members due to the restrictions on gatherings and therefore, often find themselves socially isolated compromising their parental capabilities. Teachers can play a great role in assisting parents by conducting authentic personal dialogues with them in which they can listen to their own needs, express empathy and lower their fear levels, in turn this will prove beneficial for their children as well. In addition, teachers need to find a way to conduct authentic dialogue with children in order to support their emotional needs during this challenging period in world history. Can it be done through a computer screen? Can teachers provide an open dialogic space with the expectation that children will be able to speak their thoughts and their feelings when they are surrounded by other

family members at home, in a noisy environment rather than having a face-to-face talk with their them. The United Nations report of 2020 (United Nations, 2020) shows that many children do not even have computers at home or online access and have not been in contact with their teachers or their peers for many months and unfortunately, there is no foreseeable end. Schroeder and Kelley (2010) explain that early childhood teachers have an extremely important task in reducing anxiety for young children, because they are not as emotionally attached as a parent. The child explores what the teacher's reactions are to stressful situations and how they can help them understand what is going on around them. In normative times, preschool teachers testify to the fact that preschoolers feel more comfortable speaking of their fears with their teachers because they know that they won't be judged or reprimanded as they would be by a parent (Strickland & Marinak, 2015).

Mahmut's (2020) research on educational policies during the COVID-19 pandemic raises many important issues with regard to preschooler's emotional development, claiming that children are used to going to school, meeting friends, experiencing learning through social play and now all of that is gone. They have developed negative attitudes as well as fear towards their educational settings as family conversations revolve around news reports discussing the dangers posed in these settings due to the pandemic.

2. Problem Statement

Authentic dialogue in early childhood education has been of interest to researchers in sciences of education, as preschools today are putting great emphasis on didactic, academic and content based education which comes at the expense of child centered, play oriented and constructivist approaches (Nicolopoulou, 2010).

Dialogue is considered the most common pedagogical form of interaction in early childhood education due to the fact that teachers serve as mediators for the children, explaining the world around them.

The quality of teacher-child interactions is based on the teacher's ability to open spaces for children to speak their thoughts and express their feelings, while truly listening and caring about what the child is saying (McNally & Slutsky, 2018). Preschool teachers learn a great deal about a child's developmental stages by observing them going about their daily activities. More can be learned by simply listening to what the child says as he reveals his own inner world to those around him. This will further enrich their personal relationship and enable them to conduct authentic dialogue, which can prove to be beneficial for both the child and the teacher.

3. Research Questions

The research question that is aimed to be answered in this theoretical paper is whether the authentic dialogue be achieved between teachers and children through remote teaching.

4. Purpose of the Study

The importance of this paper resides in the fact that it analysis several conceptualizations of the authentic dialogue and its ability to promote social and emotional support for children in classrooms. Moreover, it provides theoretical evidence that this form of dialogue can be effective in advancing collaborative think tanks in various fields of work and forms of teaching.

5. Research Methods

This is a theoretical paper, based on the up-to-date literature discussing the topic of authentic dialogue in classrooms and the way COVID19 pandemic has affected this dialogue. The recommendations and the conclusions of this paper were achieved based on the literature review.

6. Findings

Based on the literature review, a series of research informed recommendations are listed below, in the direction of the facilitation of authentic dialogue in remote teaching conditions, specifically addressing the cooperation between parents-teachers-children.

Lunn et al. (2020) explains that if teachers and parents learn to cooperate in challenging times, they can play an important role in preventing children's negative attitudes towards school. Hong et al. (2020) explain that the pandemic brought teachers and parents together in a way that has never been seen before. They are both able to express empathy towards each other through mutual dialogue while displaying a desire for positive cooperation with the child's educational needs as a first priority. Parents are showing a true sign of recognition for the teachers attempts to engage children in remote learning. The relationship between families and teachers directly affects the quality of the teacher's relationship with the children, due to the fact that the two microsystems are both equally interested in promoting the child's well-being (Tokić & Vukašinović, 2020). Cooperation between parents and teachers can be assessed in several ways. Does it mean that teachers send learning tasks via the internet to the parents and they make sure that the children abide? How much control does a child have of his learning process when all the power is now in his parent's hands? Peeters and Sharmahd (2019) explain the term of participatory pedagogy, meaning that there needs to be a mutual understanding that a child is competent of doing things that interest him, in turn leading to significant learning. Children need to be given more control over what they will be learning and in what manner, something a teacher needs to explain to parents.

In order to try and stay in touch during the pandemic, early childhood teachers send internet links to parents on a daily basis. They wanted the children to participate in a 30–45-minute circle time gathering so that they can see their peers and be able to participate in the planned curriculum. What was not taken into consideration was that the time slot is not convenient for working parents, but a greater concern was the fact that this type of teaching is in direct contrast to contemporary early childhood pedagogy that consists of children led curriculum. They explore topics that interest them and the teachers are there to scaffold their learning as well as provide tools and skills that they can use while interacting with their peers. Unfortunately, teachers resided back to traditional forms of classroom teaching, because they saw it as most appropriate for remote learning. (Tokić & Vukašinović, 2020) claim that teachers need to use the virtual platforms to conduct authentic dialogue with children instead of using it to relay learning content.

In this process, children will feel comfortable to ask questions and try to form meaningful dialogue that will reassure their fears and provide emotional stability through a balance of power (Peeters & Sharmahd, 2019).

Authentic personal dialogue can be conducted via individual video talks as well as small group meetings so that children can actually see their teachers and their friends (United Nations, 2020). Teachers can ask the children in a reflective and compassionate manner what interests them to speak about or learn about in the upcoming meeting and prepare lessons accordingly. Face to face education is always effective in preschools, however since it cannot be done in the pandemic, there must be alternative solutions to provide emotional and social support for their needs.

7. Conclusion

This paper paves the way for future research that aim to examine the effects remote teaching has on the social and emotional competences of children in general and preschoolers in particular. The worldwide pandemic that has affected millions of lives over the past year in many ways, can prove to be an opportunity for researchers to explore remote classroom pedagogy from the perspective of reframing social connectedness, i.e. its ability to keep teachers and children in close relationships while being physically distanced. The research question of "Can authentic dialogue be achieved between teachers and children through remote teaching?" can only be attempted to be answered if there is an understanding of the importance this type of dialogue has on children's development.

The literature review included in this theoretical paper reflects the effects authentic dialogue can have on significant learning in educational settings while detailing the way teachers are still conducting their classroom dialogue in order to preserve traditional hierarchy. This paper offers insights in the ways teachers should reevaluate the way they view and conduct didactic pedagogy. Moreover, it sheds light on its social and emotional implications on children's ability to be active participants in classroom dialogue, feeling equally important as their teachers. Given the opportunity to speak their minds about relevant topics important to them, the children will have the chance to boost their self-confidence and improve their overall sense of wellbeing. Furthermore, this knowledge can be implemented in teacher training courses, emphasizing the need for integrating authentic dialogue into their daily curriculum, as well as providing ample time and space to conduct these dialogues.

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