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Empowering Children Through Dialogue and Discussion

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Done thoughtfully, classroom dialogue is a natural way to help young children think and learn.

There is nothing more delightful and illuminating than talking about big ideas with little people. Examining our worlds is the essence of humanity, and children can barely wait to share their insights, ideas, and questions with others.

Learning in dialogue runs deep in the human race; the oral traditions of our ancestors took place not in passive transactions, but in asking questions, deliberating, sharing experiences, and negotiating truths. Our large, intricate brains evolved to consider and discuss our shared human condition, even as we are living it.

Dialogue exercises all the complex cognitive skills (and corresponding brain functions) that we know enhance school performance, including executive functions such as planning, problem solving, and negotiating rules, and self-regulation skills like inhibition and emotion regulation (Vitiello & Greenfield, 2017). And—as with learning languages and instruments—children easily and naturally embody all the key ingredients to dialogue: asking questions, thinking divergently, being present, and taking intellectual risks.

Let's consider why dialogue is a strategy especially suited to engaging young children.

Children Ask the Best Questions

The Greek philosopher Socrates and my 8-year old daughter, Sonia, have something in common: a passion for questions. Socrates asked his colleague Meno's slave 50 questions about whether virtue can be taught or is endowed by nature, leading the boy to arrive at insightful conclusions on his own. Indeed, Socrates' talent as a teacher lay not in his accumulated knowledge, but in asking thoughtful, probing, and upending questions.

Sonia also asks probing questions. There are many unique things about Sonia, but this isn't one of them; preschool and elementary-age kids are natural inquirers. In one study, kids

wired with recording devices throughout each day were found to ask a whopping 76 information-seeking questions per hour (Chouinard et al., 2007).

Young children's questions are remarkably unhindered by social convention. Whether the subject is delicate, trivial, or deeply philosophical, kids want to know how, why, when, and so on. They seek the origins of ideas and the consequences of them. After being told about Socrates and Meno, I can imagine a 5th grader asking things like "Why did Meno have a boy slave? How could Socrates, a great questioner, talk to this child for hours and not ask him his name? Why didn't Socrates question whether slavery is right?"

These types of questions are the foundation for critical thinking and the seeds of productive dialogue. And—to use a Socratic syllogism—since dialogue and discussion center on questions and children are master questioners, then children are uniquely suited for dialogue and discussion.

Elementary-age children's inquiry displays an openness to unusual possibilities and original perspectives, also known as divergent thinking. Divergent thinkers generate a huge variety of solutions to any given problem, fluently and with originality (Guilford, 1968). A classic divergent thinking test might prompt, "Name all of the things you can do with a paperclip"—to which a child may ask, "What if the paperclip is 10 feet tall?" When asked these types of creative-solution questions, children often come up with valid answers in the hundreds.

Divergent thinking is essential to creative problem solving across disciplines and is ideal for dialogue. Divergent thinkers push the imagined boundaries in science, art, and human understanding. They may suggest things that seem ridiculous but turn out to have merit. My son recently wondered, "Do trees feel pain when they are cut down?" This sounded naïve, but later I read of a study in which a University of British Columbia botanist discovered that when a tree is cut, it sends out electrical signals in a nearly identical way to wounded human tissue (Simard, 2018).

Like Socrates, most kids begin their inquiry by assuming they don't know much. In other words, kids conquer that counterproductive adult urge to appear knowledgeable! Such lack of self-consciousness allows a student to take more stabs at understanding, more "shots on the basket"—to take risks and have more opportunity for practice.¹

Children are also less apt than adults to use cognitive "shortcuts" and emotion-based heuristics in their decision making and thinking (Furlan, Agnoli, & Reyna, 2013). Most adults have gotten so good at shortcuts that they sacrifice good thinking for speed. But in dialogue, brain shortcuts aren't as effective for "peeling back" ideas and seeing things in different ways (Ostroff, 2019). From the Zen Buddhist perspective, kids embody "beginner's mind," uncluttered by preconceptions or prejudices.

Children are also ideal discussion participants because they reside in the present. Adults' minds are cluttered with our own struggles and narratives. But children, usually just beginning to know who they are in the world, are less attached to what they can and can't do, think, or say. Moreover, kids aren't as frequently thinking of their list of things to do. Being in the moment opens up the way people respond to things.

Hearing from Kids

Dialogue is one of few pedagogies that truly empowers and transforms learners. We need to give children, especially, the opportunity to be in charge of their learning and show them their voice matters, because kids are often swiftly disenfranchised by hierarchical models of education. One of my former students, now a kindergarten teacher, noticed that in just one year of school (the transition from pre-K at four-years old to kindergarten at 5-years old), her students had already been socialized to inhibit their questioning. Children are very sensitive to adult cues as they converse: A study on conversations with young children also showed that it doesn't take long for them to feel and enact implicit racism, sexism, and violence when these things are present (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Berikoff, 2008).

We need to hear from kids, listen to their genuine interactions, and allow them to challenge our biases. Furthermore, asking questions and collaborating in dialogue enhances kids' academic success. Real-time insights and "aha!" moments are more likely to emerge when kids think or solve problems together. In one study, 3rd graders were better able to find their own solutions or ask their own genuine questions after first talking and struggling together collaboratively (Cifone, 2013).



Photo by Kevin Davis.

The Quest for a Great Discussion

A great discussion is one of the best ways to engage people of all ages, to make student learning visible, and to create community. Kids of all ages can do this, but if they aren't used to taking charge of their own learning, it will take time and practice. Students will need to break engrained hierarchies, like looking to the teacher for the right questions and answers and raising hands to speak. When learners respond to questions from a place of genuine interest (rather than trying to please teachers), they use entirely different networks of their brains (Kang et al., 2009); students in a dialogue-based classroom who've become used to more teacher-centric ways of doing school will need to rebuild those neural connections. So dialogue is not a "one off" experience to try, but a classroom way of life to practice over weeks, months, or years.

For teachers, the practice of using dialogue will also take time to get used to. There's no way to avoid a bit of chaos at first with this redistribution of power. But when a dialogue group truly connects and launches into authentic deep learning, there is nothing more thrilling! Faith in the learning process is the key, and this comes from knowing that dialogue has been an ideal way to transform students throughout thousands of years.

Ready to dive in? Considering some likely educator questions, here are suggestions for using dialogue in your classroom.

In What Subject Area Should I Use Dialogue?

In any subject area. For example, the National Paideia Center offers seminar lesson plans in such elementary school topics as the 1–100 number chart, the human skeleton, the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, and in many middle school-age topics. Within any academic discipline, there are many texts to choose from. Packages of age-appropriate readings are put out by discussion teaching organizations like Junior Great Books, the Touchstones Discussion Project, and *The Art of Storytelling: Plains Indians Perspectives*, to mention a few.

Almost any text can work: a picture book for the youngest children, an excerpt from a longer essay or book for older ones, a news story or video clip. Choose current events, topics of perennial debate, or sections of a poem or powerful literary text that students can really engage in. As humans, children have experience with universal philosophical topics like courage, prejudice, and friendship. They have stories and ideas they would love to share.

How Do I Plan for a Lesson I Can't Predict?

Plan your session in terms of content and timing—but plan loosely. You may choose to read the text aloud for younger kids. Whenever possible, give them a hard copy or excerpt to reference directly during discussion. Older elementary or middle school children can read the text beforehand, but you may want to review the main points of content in class before beginning the discussion.

Less is more in the beginning. Even with my college students, I begin discussion courses with provocative texts no longer than a page or two, that they can read and take notes on right in class. Everyone should have a pencil and paper ready to take notes on ideas that pop up during the seminar. I encourage kids to keep a "seminar notebook" and respond with notes as they read. Young children can draw pictures in their notebook of what they thought the text was about.



Photo by Kevin Davis.

Choose texts with themes you feel are important, but don't be attached to those themes; part of the beauty of the seminar is the element of surprise. Sometimes it takes a group some awkward moments to warm up to a discussion session. There may be disagreements or uneven participation. Often it takes many sessions for a group to develop trust, open up, and gel in terms of personality styles.

Think of dialogue like improv theatre, in which participants have to be ready to respond in real time to unanticipated twists and turns of topics, others' ideas, and their own new insights. Like other creative endeavors, discussion cannot be scripted or planned. Almost anything can happen.

What About Ground Rules and Logistics?

The main aim of a discussion or dialogue is to search for insights and meaning together, by thinking critically and asking about and reflecting upon the common text. Develop ground rules as a group before beginning.

Students in a dialogue speak to one another freely, without raising hands, and they look at one another rather than at the teacher. The best arrangement is to sit in a circle so every member can see one another and make clear eye contact. While questions come from every member of the group, it's the teacher's job to get the group to go deeper without stifling student freedom and enthusiasm. This is a delicate art, practiced by asking follow-up questions, connecting ideas, and challenging biases. The leader rarely offers his or her interpretation of the text, but rather summarizes the ideas of the students and draws insights back to the text for evidence.

In a seasoned dialogue group, members can easily take turns facilitating or cofacilitating—but this takes time to develop. At the beginning of forming a group, I like to use go-arounds to have everyone in the group weigh in on a particular question or to kick-off our conversation with an initial thought or quote that moved them.

Students share the responsibility for a great discussion. It's up to every group member to help in the endeavor. Our goal should always be full, equal participation, including practicing active listening and speaking to one another. Everyone's experience is equally valid, regardless of background or school performance outside the discussion. We need to listen carefully to one another. We never speak when someone else is speaking and never make fun of what someone says.

To show kids there are different jobs for participants in a discussion, I use the analogy of building a snowman. First someone puts out a tightly packed snowball (question or idea about the text). As a group, we roll it around a bit and let it gather more snow. If we roll it too much in one direction, it's going to become like a flat wheel. We need to stop now and then, smooth it out, then roll it in another direction for a while (go against the grain of our own thinking). When it feels big enough, we leave that first snowball for the base and start another one for the middle. Likewise, we don't need everyone to put out original ideas. Some members are going to be in charge of rolling or smoothing; some heavy lifters will pick up the middle snowball and connect it to the base—and so on.

In my classroom, I have a sign that reads, "Temporarily Suspend Your Own Beliefs." This is very important for a discussion. Let students know that, in this space, they can try on ideas, say thoughts that are only half-formed, and take multiple perspectives.

How Do I Get Started—and How Much Time Do I Allot?

I recommend 30 or 40 minutes of discussion for children aged 6–9, an hour or so for students aged 10–13. Let the students know that the time is special. It's a great privilege to spend time together in discussion. I always tell my students that we will honor the time we

have allotted—we won't end early if we "run out of things to say." Then, when there are lulls, we all know it's OK to sit and think. While it may sometimes seem like you're waiting a while for a student response, giving students time to think before they speak is a wonderful skill for everyone to practice.

One great way to begin is with a few minutes of focused breathing and quiet time, to start to think about the texts at hand. Next, do some pre-work to delve into the texts. Everyone has notes or drawings or ideas that came to them when reading or listening to the text. Students can share this first-round thinking to get deeper into analysis or inquiry before the whole-group discussion.

With little ones, have pairs of students sit together and share their thoughts with the goal of coming up with an idea or question to share with the bigger group. I generally break older students into groups of three or four, having them share their initial thinking with one another and identify one or two important quotes from the text, and one or two discussion questions. Students should try not to ask questions that have only one right answer, and always to think about "the next question" which pushes an original question deeper. An excellent strategy for developing seminar questions is the Question Focus Technique, in which students brainstorm many questions together and decide as a group which will be the most fruitful for discussion (Rothstein & Santana, 2011).

After pre-thinking, re-form the bigger circle, making sure everyone can see one another's eyes, and begin talking together about a quote or a question from the text that excites students. At that point, I always remind any group that our main goal is to foster mutual respect and equal treatment for all the voices in the room.

When you near the end of the discussion time, ask the students to go around again and speak to any idea, thought, insight, or question that they didn't get to say during the session. Sometimes I ask students to mention something that will stay with them from our dialogue. One of the most important things to do in the last few minutes is reflect on how the group did in meeting the goals of the discussion ("What goals and agreements did we meet today?" "What was hardest for you?").

Humanity and Wisdom

Each time you try discussion-based learning with young students, you may be surprised at what you hear the children's experiences were or what most impacted them. I guarantee you will be moved by the humanity and wisdom shown in a discussion group of empowered children.

Reflect & Discuss

- Ostroff notes that young children engage well in divergent thinking—imagining highly unusual perspectives or ideas. Can you think of a time when a child surprised you by coming up with an unusual idea or solution?
- Think of a wonderful discussion with children under 9 you've observed. What elements do you think made the discussion successful?
- Talking with children about big ideas can be "delightful" as Ostroff says, but it can sometimes be difficult. What are barriers you've found to having kids this young do a real discussion? How might you overcome them?

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Endnote

¹ Kindergarteners generally beat out Harvard MBA students in the *Marshmallow Challenge*, in which participants compete to build the tallest freestanding tower out of dry spaghetti, tape, string and one marshmallow (Berger, 2014).

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