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Response to the School of the Dialogue of Cultures as a Dialogic Pedagogy

ABSTRACT

When I read the “raw” examples of teachers and students working together to explore concepts in the School of the Dialogue of Cultures (SDC), I was struck by the level of skill, knowledge, and aesthetically oriented passion that underpins such pedagogy. I want to comment on this in particular, since examples always bring ideas to life and, in my view, assist teachers in exploring their practice. In this way I think these articles make a valuable, and timely contribution to education in a century plagued by epistemologies that either place a teacher in the role of little more than a facilitator who deals tactfully with shared ignorance (since anything goes in a postmodern sense) for fear of imposing “truths” or in the role of an expert who is charged with responsibility for teaching a set of pre-identified learning outcomes/unit standards with heavy accountability to the state. Here the refreshing view of the teacher as an ontologist who has permission to genuinely (and authentically) ponder with her students and encourage dialogue, consensus, and dissensus as equally valuable means of understanding, signals a relational pedagogy that is based on real issues and problems to be solved rather than those that are

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predetermined or even avoided. I wonder how many teachers would share this view and what qualities a teacher would need to engage with SDC in these ways?

The dialogues around culture were fascinating to me, and I wondered if the same theorizing could not be applied to the SDC and its location within a range of countries and societies—more particularly in contemporary education systems in 2010. Never before has there been more of a need to strengthen learning that promotes critical thinkers who are able to stand up against popular (arguably monologic) views/dogma. This kind of teaching (and learning) is also a form of professional development, characteristic of lifelong learning, in itself—a point I think the writers ought to acknowledge and explore more fully for their pedagogic readers. It is strongly aligned to the Maori notion of “ako,” whereby the learning–teaching relationship is seen as reciprocal (Tamati, 2005) and notions of knowledge are both inherited and transformative. The SDC represents a means of potential border crossing and a way of engaging with the worldviews of “other” <<of “the other” or “of “others”?”>> (Kostogriz, 2004) in a very tangible, and provocative manner.

SDC approaches are important because, in order for cultures to regenerate, shift, or hybridize, it is essential that dispositions and skills of inquiry, dialogue, and debate are not only nurtured but also modeled. This is what “curriculum” is all about, as Matusov (2009) suggests, but as Solomadin and Kurganov (2009) highlight, it is also concerned with *content* knowledge so that participants of dialogue can stand between philosophical and cultural perspectives (seen from multiple points of view) to generate dialogue and new knowledge. This dual conceptualization seems to present a necessary paradox—if specific content is to be understood, how can curriculum be movable? Conversely—if the curriculum is fluid, how can specific content be grasped? I agree with Berlyand that content and practice of teaching is a dialogic endeavour and suggest that the traditional positioning of these as paradox is at the heart of the epistemological-ontological “rub” teachers face. The traditional paradox has consumed the hearts and minds of my esteemed colleagues in bringing the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), to life in pedagogy (see, e.g., Hedges and Cullen, 2005). Even in the examples provided by the SDC pedagogues it seems very clear that if curriculum is to be considered as both the content of what is to be learned and the way it is to be learned, there is always likely to be some element of teacher control. How then, can curriculum be movable and pliant (as Matusov suggests) while concerned with content?

I also want to address this notion of culture in relation to Berlyand’s (2009, p. 18) depiction of the role of “institution of school” as opposed to “family.” In contemporary society younger and younger children are spending vast amounts of time in educational settings out of the home—periods of time that to some extent are replacing traditional roles of the home and school demarcation. Here I invoke Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope because the world of “home” and “educational institution” in 2010 represent two vastly different dialogic arenas that intersect for

the child and, in doing so, necessitate consideration of diversity and difference at its rawest. Hence, it is less a case of seeing the school as a secondary or separate locale that represents some sort of break, relief, or transgression as seeing it as a primary site in which teacher orientation has to be fundamentally concerned with form shaping in collaboration with the family at home. For the early childhood teacher especially, an important question to ask, then, is “how can teachers work dialogically with families to ensure that cultures, and individuals within them, are not completely consummated by the culture of the institution (and the people within it)?” and “where is the loophole for the child to ‘be’ otherwise? That is, beyond either cultural setting?”

I was struck by the comments of Kurganov (2009) regarding the necessary skills and attitudes teachers must possess and nurture in order to facilitate the SDC. I think this is a timely reminder to teacher education in the ways teachers are currently being prepared to teach, and the kinds of syllabi they are providing for students accordingly. The key lies in Matusov’s (2009) pivotal emphasis on ontology as opposed to epistemology since, for teachers to teach dialogically, they are entering into the risky territory of investigating, suspending and redefining truths while for teachers to teach epistemologically they are more concerned with the practices (artistry) of persuasion they bring.

A theme that presented itself consistently across the articles was the idea of consciousness. Consciousness—of both the learner and the teacher—lie at the heart of the SDC. Bakhtin’s emphasis on point of view and personality takes priority over specific learning goals in the dialogic classroom—a phenomenon Sullivan (2007) describes as soul and spirit at play. Since so much emphasis is placed, in the articles, on student consciousness, I wonder what advice the SDC pedagogues would give to teachers in working effectively with both their *own* consciousness (which I argue is a prerequisite to working with others) and those of their students. Although the role of observation is not discussed in these articles, I suspect that such intense knowledge of each student would be essential for these encounters. Does that knowledge come through dialogue or is it a necessary precursor for effective dialogue? I would argue that it is both. One of the problems that we face in the SDC and, indeed, as did Bakhtin himself (see, e.g., commentaries in Bakhtin, 1990) is that there appears to be an implicit assumption that consciousnesses are equal, or perhaps “unfolding” (Berlyand, 2009)—with the expertise of the teacher as a dialogic provocateur in pedagogic activity. For dialogue of this nature to occur it would seem to me that participants have to feel that they can share their point of view freely or that, indeed, they have a point of view at all for that matter. I would argue that such perspectives are not always the case, and that, in making the assumption that there is freedom of speech in any classroom, there is a naivety about this ideal. There is evidence, in research of mainstream classrooms and early childhood education settings, that all children do *not* always get heard (Nuthall, 2007), seen (White, 2009 <<there are two references for White, 2009; please label them a or b in the list and in text cites>>) and consequently “known” and

that there are legitimate reasons/excuses either for students not to be eager to debate issues, or for teachers to fail to notice that someone is being overlooked. Indeed Alton-Lee (2003) has highlighted the point that teachers unwittingly perpetuate the very prejudices they seek to redress. An outcry of this observation, in the context of SDC, is that it may privilege some individuals over others on the grounds that they feel free to disagree, debate, and alter their opinions based on open dialogue. A fruitful future article on the kinds of conditions that the SDC students and teachers worked within may help shed light on what would need to happen prior to the dialogue for this level of heteroglossia to occur.

As an early childhood education pedagogue, however, I dispute the SDC positioning of contemporary “preschoolers” as incapable of working within this framework. In particular, I take issue with the views of the SDC scholars, such as Kurganov, who argue that children under age seven cannot engage with “points of wonder” (described by Matusov as both motivation and means of comprehension) since there is a growing body of research that suggests very young children are capable of such wonderment given the “right” pedagogical conditions. I suggest this deficit view is twofold—first, because the SDC is so heavily influenced by Vygotskian theories, which, in my view, can limit the way scholars and teachers alike think about very young children since, for Vygotsky, there is no critical learning period for under-two-year-olds despite convincing neurological research that suggests otherwise (see, e.g., Meltzoff, 2009); and Junefelt’s (2007) recent study challenges Solomadin and Kurganov’s (2009) associated position regarding egocentric and private speech. Second, I suggest that the emphasis on Socratic dialogue within this period of learning challenges teachers who do not share the same developmental modes of learning and, if Berryman’s <<Berlyand? or please add Berryman to references>> demarcation is accepted, the young child is merely at a point of initial understanding, rather than wonderment. I concur with Kurganov (2009) who suggests that the critical point of pedagogical entry lies in the act of teachers interpreting the learner. In the case of early childhood education, I invoke Matusov’s claim that engagement is not an indication of the young child’s deficiency, rather the teachers inability to “see” the learner not only as an infant, toddler, or young child, and member of a cultural community of learners, but also as an individual (here I revisit the Bakhtinian loophole) with the capacity to amaze, challenge, and perhaps even demolish preconceived ideas. I believe that a confounding reason young children have been seen as incapable of such wonderment is a result of the differing genres that they employ to conceptualize ideas and the way those ideas are expressed (White, 2009 <<a or b?>>)—a point also alluded to by Solomadin and Kurganov. This is why play is so privileged, yet elusive, in early childhood education practice, since it is one lens through which adults can try to understand points of view, and through which young children can safely grapple with difference in ways that are relevant to their specific styles of communication—yet teachers seem to be uncertain of their pedagogic role (White, 2009 <<a or b?>>; Wood, 2007). I wonder what an SDC approach to play-based

classrooms might offer? This would be a much needed and useful addition to the field and one that has few precedents. I propose that Kurganov's pivotal questions (2009, p. 42) may shed some light on this interpretation, since they foreground subjectivity as the essential consideration for teachers.

In essence, these scholars provide a convincing argument for the SDC as a transformational pedagogical movement that places teacher knowledge, skill, and attitude under the pedagogical spotlight in the first instance, since the SDC holds an expectation that learning will occur when it is presented as an increasingly complex smorgasbord of debatable possibilities for the individual in dialogic exchange rather than as a package deal (curriculum) of learning outcomes for a cultural collective. Matusov's suggestion that dialogic teachers need to be scholars in their own right, as all SDC teachers are, offers a timely reminder that teacher education and ongoing professional development (where teachers can be exposed, in an ongoing manner, to a wide range of content knowledge *and* to dialogic pedagogical strategies) is not only desirable but also essential if the central tenets of the SDC are ever to be realized. I urge these writers to go beyond both the coal face <<**I'm not familiar with this phrase**>> of classroom practice, and beyond limiting definitions of capability according to age, to explore those wider conditions and their influence on dialogue at a local, national, and international level. It is here that dialogue must also take place, and where I look forward to extending the encounter.

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