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CiCe  
Institute for Policy Studies in Education  
London Metropolitan University  
166 – 220 Holloway Road  
London N7 8DB  
UK

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## **Dialogue for democracy**

*Elisabeth Elmeroth*

*University of Kalmar (Sweden)*

### **Introduction**

In this paper I present an attempt to create dialogues among teenagers in a Swedish school. Dialogues are essential in education for citizenship, and particular for the development of democratic citizens. By talking and listening to each other the pupils in this study were supposed to learn respect and empathy. The teacher wanted to foster the children to take part in society and stand up for their own opinions through training in dialogue. In the dialogues the pupils were supposed to deal with feelings in order to create solidarity and democracy. The teachers used one lesson every fortnight for these dialogues.

### **Background**

The Swedish curriculum stipulates that schools have the task of imparting, forming and instilling in pupils the fundamental values of society. It is not sufficient only to learn about democratic values: the school must also use democratic working methods and prepare pupils for active participation in civic life. The school is therefore an important factor in bringing up the new generation and fostering them in democracy and empathy.

The school is a social meeting place where pupils are able to learn to empathise with the conditions of others and form personal points of view. Through co-operation with others, pupils actively participate in social life and develop their ability to communicate. By providing opportunities for discussion, pupils develop citizenship.

An important task for the school is to create opportunities for dialogues, where pupils can develop their language skills. The school should also stimulate all pupils to develop the courage, desire and ability to express feelings in order to play an active part in society. Through discussions and dialogue the pupils' democratic values will be fostered and defined. Dialogue must be a part of the curriculum and teachers must find time to let pupils talk. Through these dialogues pupils have opportunities to practice tolerance and respect for different points of view and to learn to listen to each other. They also learn to see other perspectives and in this way develop their citizenship.

Research about dialogues in school has focused on dialogue as a means for cognitive development. In this study I relate the opinions of pupils and teachers about dialogue as a means for the development of democratic citizens. I have followed the teachers and pupils as they practised dialogues during school lessons. The object of talking about different feelings was for pupils to learn to know themselves and each other in a new way. The dialogue also aimed at contributing to developing the pupils' sense of togetherness and solidarity.

#### *The role of the teacher*

Englund (2001) talks about the deliberate dialogue and describes this as a conversation with elements where there are opportunities for pupils to argue, to solve problems and to talk about different problems and points of view, without any teacher participation.

However Jönsson (1992), who has carried out philosophical dialogues with pupils, suggests that the teacher has an important role in creating an atmosphere of respect for each of the pupils and between pupils. One possible method could be for the teacher to ask for specifications, answer with new questions and give questions to other pupils in the dialogue. The teacher could also slow down the conversation in order to deepen the arguments or to elaborate a point of view.

In order to create a mutual dialogue the teacher must abandon the common teacher's role of asking questions and judging answers. This sort of conversation is characterised by the adult guiding what is said and judging the pupils' responses.

### *The role of the pupil*

In the traditional classroom dialogue, pupils do not have any influence on the content of the communication and their thoughts and ideas have low value. Not only the teacher, but also the pupils need to change their communication style. The pupils have to free themselves from a behaviour which has been learned in the customary classroom conversation. In taped dialogues of the traditional kind, Garne (1992) shows how pupils can talk for a long time without using more than a few words, and where the most common words are yes and no.

In most groups there is a lack of balance in the distribution of the space of speech: Atterström (1996) found that about 15 to 20 per cent of the pupils more or less avoid talking. At the same time there are pupils who love talking and send out 'joy of speaking' messages. Pupils from these two extreme groups have different prerequisites for participation in the dialogue.

Bernstein (1974) states that there is a connection between the pupil's family background and the development of an elaborated code. Flexibility and a broad register of ways of expression characterise this code. The restricted code, on the other hand, means that the pupils express themselves in a reserved manner, without the ability to explain their thoughts.

According to Vygotskij (1986) difficulties in elucidating thoughts can depend on the difference between thought and language. Feelings, opinions and whole arguments, which in the inner speech can be expressed with a simple concept, are hard to translate into outer speech. According to this theory the task of talking about feelings demands a translation of the feeling from inner to outer language.

A further reason why some people find it hard to participate in dialogues can be, according to Atterström (1996), an expectation of negative reactions from the audience. Pupils are especially afraid of criticism from other pupils.

### **Purpose and methods**

The study aims to describe and analyse the opinions of teachers and pupils about the dialogue with special reference to the purpose of the dialogue and to the distribution of the space of speech.

The data collection involved twelve classes from Grades Seven, Eight and Nine in a compulsory school. The pupils and the teachers from these classes carried out dialogues in one lesson every other week during a school year. At the end of the lessons both

teachers and pupils wrote comments to me about the conversation. I have conducted data syntheses, and returned them to the teachers for discussion with me and with the pupils. I also took the role of participating observer during some teachers' seminars at the school.

## Results

### *Purpose of the dialogue*

The teachers aimed to strengthen group spirit among the pupils and stated that pupils cannot empathise with the conditions of others if they not are aware of their own conditions. Through talking about their own feelings they would get to know others better. The pupils were also expected to learn respect to each other.

In the seminars the teachers agreed that the aim was to increase fellowship through the dialogues. The pupils also described how the good spirit had been strengthened when they learn to know each other better. One pupil said:

*This is very good, there is a clear improvement of the spirit and fellowship in the class and in the whole school.*

The pupil who wrote this realised the role of dialogue in the classroom climate and school culture: a culture where people meet and talk to each other creates a sound starting point for citizenship and democracy.

Other pupils' opinions about the significance of the dialogue mentioned the value of having time to talk about important things and about the thoughts that are raised. The pupils had new ideas when listening to each other. The pupils also valued having the occasion to reflect on feelings and they thought that it was fun to have variety:

*It's fun to do other things than reading and counting.*

By means of the dialogues the teacher wanted the pupils to learn to talk about their feelings. One teacher said:

*The purpose is that they should learn to identify different feelings and different ways to handle them.*

Most of the pupils agreed with this purpose. The pupils thought that it was good to discuss and to practice talking together. They also felt that it was important to learn to express one's feelings:

*This is very important, so I try to listen very carefully. I want to learn more and understand other pupils' feelings; it is enormously important and interesting.*

Some pupils however found it hard to see the purpose of talking about feelings rather than concentrating on knowledge. One pupil thought it:

*A total waste of time.*

The teachers also commented on this in their notes from the dialogues:

*Pupils who focus on performance do not think that it is worth wasting time on democratic values.*

A further purpose of the dialogues was for pupils to become used to showing respect for each other. At the start of the term the teachers discussed how to practice respect. This led to reflection on rules for carrying out the dialogues. The teachers were agreed about one rule:

*It is important that the teacher set a positive atmosphere and that pupils are not allowed to comment on each other.*

#### *Distribution of space of speech*

In the teachers' seminars some of the teachers spoke about their anxiety about the distribution of space of speech. The steered dialogue is simple and well known to teachers, but how should they treat a dialogue about feelings? Some suggestions for rules were formulated:

*Everyone should have as much space as everyone else.*

*No one is allowed to be cheeky.*

#### *Silent pupils*

The teachers discussed what to do if some pupils remained silent. Everyone agreed that no pupil should be forced to talk. The quotation below, about pupils who find it hard to talk, is taken from the teachers' first seminar.

*... pupils, who find it hard to talk ... not force anyone, create a positive atmosphere.*

The pupils were more precise about the difficulties of speaking - the word painful was often used.

*Horrible! I don't like to talk in front of the class. I got red as a beetroot. I felt stupid and ridiculous. I don't know why, that's the way it is.*

Although this pupil said that he does not know the reason why he feels stupid and ridiculous, he mentions that it is 'talking in front of the class' that is painful. A lot of pupils expressed themselves in the same way. The fact that people become silent if there are a lot of listeners has been mentioned above, and is described by a pupil who wrote:

*...I didn't say anything because the whole class was there today.*

Free narrative or talking on one's own initiative is more difficult than answering questions. But even answering questions can be hard, as one pupil pointed out:

*It was hard. I don't like answering questions really. I only answer if I have to.*

Sometimes the pupils were divided into smaller groups of ten to fifteen persons in order to facilitate the dialogues. Despite this, and in spite of the fact that the pupils knew their classmates well, it was painful.

*Terrifically painful, although I know everyone I feel that it is painful.*

One pupil described the nervousness, when it was his turn to say something:

*It is OK, but you have butterflies in your stomach.*

The pupils who had great resistance to talking felt relieved and happy when they finally dared to make a comment. Phrases like ‘It wasn’t that bad’ and ‘It worked out well’ show that although the pupils feared the worst, they were satisfied with themselves when they finally made a contribution. One pupil had said only one word, but he thought that it was good:

*I only answered what feeling one can have. Then I said ‘joy’. I think that it felt fairly good.*

Many pupils however could not manage to break the silence. One wrote that he preferred listening to the others rather than talking himself. A lot of pupils said that they had not talked:

*I myself never talked. I only listened to all of the others.*

There were also pupils who said that they did not have anything to say, or that they could not find the words to express their thoughts. One boy also wrote that it was hard to know what he felt.

The longer the term went on the more often there were signals from the teachers that they were worried about the silent pupils. Some quotations from their papers show this:

*There were only a few pupils who had something to say.*

*Now is the time to involve the ones who haven’t said anything. They have to dare to talk otherwise the tongue-tied-ness will grow.*

## Discussion

There are a lot of reasons to keep silent, according to the pupils, and a lot of worrying among the teachers. The figure below shows the most characteristic features in the statements from pupils and teachers.

**Figure 1 The grammar of silence**

Pupils’ voices:	Teachers’ voices:
I prefer listening	not force anyone
terrifically painful	create a positive atmosphere
I only answer if I have to	there were only a few pupils who had something to say
I get red as a beetroot	the tongue-tied-ness will grow
I feel stupid and ridiculous	we have to have rules
I have butterflies in my stomach	

This demonstrates a huge problem. Our investigation has shown that pupils stopped talking because they found it painful, because they were nervous, and/or because they did not think that they had anything to say. These pupils had become used to a passive role in school. Perhaps they will learn to take part in dialogue later on in their adult lives, but if not they will become passive citizens without a voice and without the possibility of influencing society.

However, through the methods described in this paper, the silent pupils have become noticeable to the teachers. Even if the difficulties remain, it is not until the teachers have perceived the problem that they can reflect on actions to help the silent pupils. The teachers' awareness that the pupils are afraid of comments from classmates has made them forbid comments about each other's opinions. The best solution, however, should not be to allow the silent pupils be left alone and so to be trapped in their silence. All pupils must have the opportunity to succeed and to feel that they have something interesting to bring to the dialogue.

The teachers have dared to take a step towards breaking the traditional provision of knowledge in order to provide time for their pupils' development as citizens. Teachers who teach older pupils are well-educated in their subjects and keen on giving lessons in them, but they lack practice in conducting dialogues about pupils' feelings. Despite this they have dared to test this sort of dialogue. The teachers testify to the difficulties; they discuss how to continue and how to conduct the next dialogue, and how they are going to deal with the silent pupils. They would like to see more in-service training in managing dialogues.

The school has an important task: to enhance confidence of pupils in their language abilities. The teachers in the school in which I researched have tried their utmost to get everyone involved and to encourage pupils to try out and develop different modes of expression and to experience feelings and moods, but they have not succeeded. The teachers are aware of the problems but do not have tools to solve them. They are worried and their only idea of how to proceed is to suggest rules of different kinds.

The dialogue, which aims to promote the development of pupils into responsible individuals and members of society, is important in school and needs to be taken seriously. The school needs to work with the problem of silent pupils. No pupil should become used to believing that it is enough to be quiet or just answer 'yes' or 'no'.

In this paper I have focused on the purpose of the dialogue and the distribution of the space of speech. The most important result however is the picture of the silent pupils. Of course I found a lot of pupils who liked talking, and some teachers who did not have any problem with the distribution of the space of speech. One of the teachers has reached through the silent pupils' barrier and writes:

*Sure, it is marvellous and surprising that there, behind the unsafe and disinterested faces, are so many funny and sensible thoughts about feelings. Just think of how easy it is to bring out these nice sides of our pupils, if only we give ourselves the time.*

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