

Thoughtful Dialogue

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Abstract

With society wanting children to become great problem solvers and thinkers, we must look at the basis of our education system. Dialogue in the classroom should become the main focus of education. This article explores the use of thoughtful dialogue and how it impacts the students and the teacher. It also examines the many factors that help to enhance students' critical thinking skills, emotional well-being and spiritual awareness.

The public chant seems to be, «Let us get back to the basics: reading, writing and arithmetic.» It sounds simple, and I wish these were the basics of today. For me, a second grade teacher, the basics have been to teach behavior management skills, socialization, and how to take state tests. Every year, like all teachers across the globe, I get my room ready and great plans are made with the best of intentions. But somehow, as the year moves on and the ideas of standardized testing comes around, the number 2 pencils come out, and the dreaded bubbling begins. And the only way to prepare these children for the testing is to pass out worksheets. So, why do we teach this way? Many believe that reading and answering questions help children develop critical thinking skills, but does it really? Before curriculum is thrown out, we must ask ourselves what we really want our children to know. The basics, socialization, behavior management and test taking skills should not be the focus of schools' curriculum. Children need to be able to question and converse about all the information that schools want them to learn. Critical thinking, problem solving, emotional growth and spiritual growth should be today's basics. All of these are taught to children if thoughtful dialogue is employed in the classroom on a regular basis. Children do not need to be told what to think; they need to draw their own conclusions. «We spend so much effort teaching children the content of the subjects but do not actually teach them how to think, how to learn» (Cleghorn, 2002).

As a teacher, I want children to learn to know themselves as readers, writers and problem solvers. Many children see school as a way out, a way to get a job and ultimately money. But is this all we want for our children, or do we want a society of great problem solvers and skilled thinkers that understand the importance of knowing history, science, math, philosophy, reading and writing? The foundation of

education started when Socrates defined an educated person as a person who knows his/her own limitations. Sounds great, many people know their limitations. I know I can't win an iron man triathlon, but ask children if they can fly and what do they think? They think they can fly! So how does a teacher get across the idea of limitations to a second grader who believes anything is possible? The only way is through the basics of thoughtful dialogue.

Students who do not explore their own ideas and own understandings will never know what they can achieve. Socrates believed this knowledge of one's own self will lead to absolute truth. Isn't that what all teachers want their students to have, the absolute truth? Not in some cases. Many teachers do have the truth, but they have their truth, and the truth for one is not the truth of another. I learned this from one of my second graders. I was trying to get one of my behavior problem students to just sit down and stop running around the room screaming. After offering many rewards and punishments, I stopped, sat down at my desk, and put my head in my hands, defeated, because no matter how much punishment or rewards that were offered, nothing was working. And at that time, the office was not a solution. I sat down and asked the rest of the class to read out of their book boxes, looking for character traits. They did this even with the constant screaming. One of my students walked to my desk and told me that sometimes you just need to run and scream to get ready for something hard. I asked what was hard about reading, and he told me everything, but most of all was the silence in the room. I told my student that he was right; it was too quiet. I turned the radio on to an oldies station that my kids like to listen to while writing. Why not reading, too? The student that was running around somehow calmed down, sat down and started reading. In my mind, I thought that it needed to be silent to read and understand. My student's truth was that there needed to be some noise, music in this case, to read and understand. Truth, in this case, was an idea that needed to be reevaluated and changed. And in that moment, through thoughtful dialogue with a student, I changed my idea of music in the classroom. But if I had not listened and discussed the idea with my student, I would still have a second grader running and screaming around my room.

The idea of listening and discussing is the dialectic process that Socrates believed leads to an educated person. Then why do we have, in most schools across the country, teachers lecturing and students listening? Teachers are not the only ones with ideas. In high school and middle schools, we have debate classes and humanities classes where students discuss ideas and then formulate their own. But do we see any of these in the elementary classroom? No, because the prevailing notion is that elementary students are not ready to formulate these ideas. Wrong, my students are ready for these ideas and discussion, but only if they are shown how. All children want to talk and talk about what they know. Talking (i.e. dialogue) is a concept that all children can relate to. They do it at home, with family and with friends, so why not in the classroom, too. Discussion and dialogue is the basic building block of human thought. Being able to voice ideas and views helps children to find ideas that they want to explore in the future. Also the discussion helps students to increase their verbal and vocabulary skills, which should be the basic concern of all teachers. However, in most classrooms the only one that increases his/her verbal skills is the teacher, but through the classroom dialogue many students are able to explore the use of vocabulary. Fisher states (2001) «The dialogue in the classroom helps to extend vocabulary, focusing as it does on exploring the meaning and uses of words». In today's society, many children in the classroom are English as a Second Language Learners, and these children benefit from discussion by being able to explore words and their usages and at the same time creating their own knowledge.

According to a man that searched his entire life for knowledge, Hemmingway (1964) states it is, «not the why, but the what.» Many teachers are too concerned with what the curriculum says to teach rather than how to teach it. They should be asking themselves and the students, why do we need to know this? They should be exploring the ideas that the curriculum demands and how the students can make that information their own. According to Cleghorn (2002), «it is about the process not the facts». For example, many students can recite dates and answer questions about the War of 1812, but when it comes to understanding the motivations behind it, all the students know is that the war happened in 1812. They do not know about the tensions between the French and British that led to the war and why America allied with the French. It does not matter. They believe it is simply the facts, not the human nature that may be learned from it.

The aim of thoughtful dialogue in a classroom is for the children to «develop the ability to go beyond the information given and to engage with the text not just in terms of their literal meaning but at an analytic and conceptual level» (Fisher 2001). All schools want their students to be problem solvers, or at least they say that. But what are they doing to achieve this? Children need to explore their ideas as well as the curriculum that they are studying, whether it is math or literature. Giving facts and no time to discuss or interact with that information does not lead to growth of problem solving skills or higher level thinking. According to Fisher (2001), «If we want to actively encourage children to think for themselves and give them the means to think critically, creatively and to solve problems, then philosophy in the Socratic tradition of discussion, questioning, and experimenting with ideas, seem to have much to offer.»

Thoughtful dialogue provides students with many skills that are needed to be productive adults in our society. Schools place a great emphasis on testing of «higher level thinking,» when in the world, these skills are not measured by a score on a test but by the choices one makes and his/her actions. Thoughtful dialogue provides students with these tools that children need to achieve within our society. One of these skills is the information-processing skill. This skill helps children to reflect on the information given and also on what they know and don't know and how to interpret that information. Another skill that is acquired through discussion is the enquiry skill. It helps children pose questions and talk through the questions and problems while looking at all the aspects of the problem. One of the most important skills that can be gained through dialogue is the reasoning skill. Reasoning skills help children put reasons behind their decisions and opinions, and not just say I don't know. Children are able to talk through their decisions and find out what made them make them. Talking through the questions and problems help children to justify and defend those decisions and find evidence to support them. Another skill that is gained through discussion is the creative thinking skill. It helps children to be more flexible in their thinking. They are able to talk about problems or questions and generate and play with different ideas that may have been formed by another student. These skills also help children to suggest different hypotheses for ideas dealing with many topics, such as literature and even mathematics. Creative thinking skills also give children the opportunity to apply their imagination to these questions and pose their own ideas about the «what ifs.» Evaluation skills can also be acquired through discussion in a classroom. Discussion helps children to find reasons for their decisions and opinions. Evaluating their decisions through discussion helps children to create their own personal criteria for their judgment. Children are able to evaluate, not only others' ideas, but also their own ideas; children learn to take ownership of their ideas.

According to Tolkien (1974), «not all who wander are lost.» To many people, a classroom discussion looks «lost», however through thoughtful questions and discussion, students are able to wind a path within them to find their way to their own ideas. Children that have this opportunity to listen to dialogue also benefit through the exchange of ideas and the evidence that others have provided to support their views. By listening to others and their point of view, helps children become more tolerant of others. Expanding their views of others and preparing them to live in a society of a multitude of ideas helps children to be better adapted. According to Robert Fisher (2001), «There is no better preparation for being an active citizen in a democracy than for a child to participate with others in a community of enquiry founded in reasoning, freedom of expression and mutual respect». A classroom is a safe place, or should be where children are able to discuss and confront ideas that are hard to understand.

Thoughtful dialogue not only enhances critical thinking skills, but also promotes emotional growth. In today's society, a well-balanced child is more capable of adapting to change and being an overall happier and well-adjusted adult. Emotions contribute to being a well-adjusted person and one way of increasing one's emotional intelligence is thoughtful dialogue in the classroom. Skills that children use during a thoughtful dialogue that enhance emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills (Cleghorn, 2002). Children gain self-awareness through thoughtful discussion by expressing how they are feeling about an issue. Discussing different ideas and concepts help children to understand their abilities and have a realistic view of himself or herself as a student and as a person. Motivation is what moves us to make decisions. Being able to know what truly motivates you is a gift that thoughtful dialogue gives students. Many children have no ideas what makes them want to do something, especially when faced with a set back or discouraging attitudes. Dialogue in a classroom helps children to face others that disagree with them and find the motivation within themselves to stand by their choices, no matter what others say. Being able to find inner motivation helps children with self-esteem and self-regulation. Self-regulation is another attribute that blossoms in thoughtful dialogue. Every teacher sees children that will not wait and will do anything on impulse. Using dialogue on a regular basis in the classroom helps children to overcome impulses. During dialogue children learn to take turns, to not blurt out or even say the first thing that comes to mind. They will learn to think before talking because if students are not able to listen to others, they are unable to participate, and children what to participate. Self-regulation helps children to handle their emotions and the emotions of others in constructive way. Through discussion children and the teacher are able to discuss the emotions that arise, even if the emotions are strong and may be directed towards the teacher or another student. Being able to teach children how to talk through conflicts is a gift that not many people can give to a child. Empathy, being able to sense or understand others feelings and being able to share that with them, is a concept that is foreign, even to many adults; but in a classroom that employs thoughtful dialogue, it is used and discussed on a regular basis. By using dialogue in the classroom and sharing feelings on a regular basis, children become very aware of feelings and how they may be expressed through body language. Being able to empathize with others is a very large feat for many children, because they are usually worried about themselves not others. A classroom that discusses most topics in a very open and caring manner creates children that want to know what others think and feel and why they think and feel that way. Overall thoughtful dialogue creates social skills that many children and adults lack. Being able to navigate in a social setting helps children to prepare for life. Knowing what you believe and then listening to others and changing or affirming your beliefs is a feat that most classrooms never teach children. Most classrooms teach children there is a right and a wrong way of doing everything; but that is simply not the way it is in the real world. Children need to be able

to understand that is all right to agree to disagree. When children investigate moral and ethical questions through thoughtful dialogue, they begin to explore their own ideas, feelings, thoughts and behaviors. Being able to explore these attributes opens a world of possibilities for children that may have never even been explored. (Cleghorn, 2002).

Spiritual awareness does not mean religion, but means being able to understand where you fit in the world and who you really are as a human being. Spiritual awareness is the third attribute to thoughtful dialogue and contains several factors. The first factor that is contained in spiritual awareness is seeing values in you and within the world. Many children do not see the point of learning certain concepts, but by showing them how they relate to the world helps them to see the bigger picture and how they may fit within that picture. The next factor to spiritual awareness is seeing the unity within the world; the fact that everyone has a part and we all have something to contribute. Many children feel that they have nothing to contribute to the world because they are only children. But by using thoughtful dialogue, children see their points and ideas being shared and discussed and that gives them reasons to continue to think and share. When sharing their ideas, children come to believe that they are part of something bigger than one person in a classroom. They see that they have ideas that may challenge others to look within themselves and their conceptions of the world. Being able to see themselves as part of the “big picture,” makes children want to share and explore who they are or who they might become, and thoughtful dialogue gives them that opportunity in a safe environment and at the same time teaches them the «basics» (Cleghorn, 200).

Now what does the teacher do during this dialogue? The teacher is the facilitator, making sure that the children are able to express their ideas and views in a safe and non-threatening manner, not a shouting match. The teacher’s role is to be as neutral as possible, only interjecting when needed to add to one side of the discussion so the dialogue will not be one sided. Also the teacher may interject if the subject needs to be clarified. A teacher must be able to allow the children to expand on the knowledge that they already have, not to teach them new information directly. The students are to be the teachers for each other, sharing new ideas and new ways of viewing concepts. Teachers that use this method of thoughtful dialogue in the classroom need to be open to questioning and doubt that the children may feel, and be able to shed light on the doubts. At some point in time, the teacher may need to take a side to push the students into exploring a new view, playing the devil’s advocate. The only point where the teacher is not neutral is when she/he is expressing the rules of a conversation. The teacher must set clear rules that may not be broken; some of these rules may include: proper speaking procedures (i.e. taking turns), not interrupting and using correct grammar. Some other rules may include consideration of others’ feelings, and the students must provide proof or a justification to why they feel that way, or believe that idea. Teaching through dialogue is a kind of balancing act; and sometimes that balancing act is on a very small wire on an extremely high building. But when the first discussion goes well and all students have added to the discussion and a common idea or ideas are arrived at, that wire becomes solid ground. But keep in mind that the goal of any good discussion is for the teacher to push the students so their limitations are seen as well as their new revelations (Scolnicov, 1978).

Every parent and teacher wants children to get the best out of their education. It is not just writing, reading and arithmetic. It isn’t behavior management or socialization skills. The basics must be the questioning and thinking skills that should go with the writing, reading and arithmetic. If we want our children to be critical thinkers, then, why do schools not push thoughtful dialogue? In today’s

society, many want to know what we are doing to educate our children? Not much! To truly educate, we must not only teach the academics but also teach the child emotionally and spiritually. Using thoughtful dialogue increases critical thinking skills, emotional well-being, and spiritual awareness. If teachers will take the time to open the floor for thoughtful dialogue and the children's «why questions», children of today will become the thoughtful leaders of tomorrow. Isn't that the purpose of education?

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