Dialogic Schooling

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers a genealogy of dialogic education, tracing its origins in Romantic epistemology and corresponding philosophy of childhood, and identifying it as a counterpoint to the purposes and assumptions of universal, compulsory, state-imposed and regulated schooling. Dialogic education has historically worked against the grain of standardized mass education, not only in its view of the nature, capacities and potentialities of children (and therefore of adults as well), but in its economic, political and social views, for which childhood is understood as a promissory condition. Dialogic education is oriented to what Dewey called "a future new society of changed purposes and desires," made possible by an emergent form of social character. It has followed its own developmental trajectory from its origins in Pestalozzi's Rousseau-inspired innovations, through anarchist theory and practice and the Progressive Education movement, to its current most salient formulation in the Democratic Education movement, whether as an enemy within the gates of standardized education or as expressed in innumerable alternative forms of schooling or unschooling. The paper highlights several key characteristics, gleaned from all those forms, of the dialogic school—identified as intentionality, transitionality, emergence, aesthetic temporality, interdisciplinarity and group governmentality--and argues further that community of philosophical inquiry theory and practice as a form of post-Socratic group dialogue that emerged in the 1970's, is a pedagogical praxis that offers a grand operational template for dialogic education as a form of schooling.

I would like to engage a conversation in which we explore the necessary and sufficient conditions of a school for children and youth constructed consciously and deliberately as a dialogic social and institutional form. In order to do so, I must begin with my own prejudices, and must leave open for disagreement even the belief that a school should be a dialogic social and institutional form, or that what we know as community of philosophical inquiry (CPI) —which I consider the ur-discourse of dialogic schooling— is either necessary or desirable in the education of children and youth at all.

A GENEOLOGY OF DIALOGIC EDUCATION

First to my particular prejudices, in the form of a historical narrative. As I understand it, dialogic education as a movement is roughly 200 years old in the West, and arose as one expression, generated by a unique mix of Enlightenment and Romantic impulses, of a view of childhood and its role in cultural evolution. The view of childhood is best expressed in the particular Romantic idiomatic use of two mutually determining signifiers, "innocence" and "genius." Here "innocence" means, not blamelessness or absence of experience, but as M.H. Abrams, in his magisterial work on

the Romantic imagination, after Schelling, terms "the absolute unity—the 'identity' or 'indifference' (the utter lack of differentiation)—of subject and object;" an "original unity" that is "sundered by the process of thought" (Abrams, 1971, p. 180). Using other terminology, we might call this the human condition before the Father, before the superego and what Lyotard (1992) called the "mainmise." In the Romantic narrative, as in the Christian, we "fall" out of this condition into the state of separation which is adulthood, and the developmental goal of life is to recover it. As such, childhood becomes for the adult a prophetic condition. As Novalis (1989, p. 50) said, "The first man [sic] is the first spiritual seer. To him, all appears as spirit. What are children, if not such primal ones?" And Schiller (1966) states the Romantic mythos of the life cycle succinctly:

> They are what we were; they are what we should once again become. We were nature just as they, and our culture, by means of reason and freedom, should lead us back to nature. They are, therefore, not only the representation of our lost childhood . . . but they are also representations of our highest fulfillment in the ideal . . . (p. 85).

As representation, child as "genius" stands for that core of feeling and creativity lost to rationalism and cultural conformity, and the primary vitalistic animism of perception itself. But Romantic literature and philosophy, unlike the Victorian sentimentalization of childhood "innocence," made a clear distinction between the real child and the child as prophetic statement. Schiller (1966, p. 87) calls the child "a lively representation to us of the ideal, not indeed as it is fulfilled, but as it is enjoined." Childhood is doomed to die in each person, because "child" means relative undifferentiation, and, as Coleridge pointed out, differentiation is "the necessary condition for progressive development."[1] That progressive development is in the realm of culture, which we may read as education. Schiller goes further in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1954/1795) and identifies that form of education as most fully expressed in a *dialogue* between the rational and the sensuous, reason and desire, or what Dewey would later call habit and impulse—a dialogue that is epitomized in what Schiller calls the "play impulse," and what W.D. Winnicott (1971) called the realm of "transitional space." The latter may be characterized as that form of temporality most typically associated with the experience of creativity in deep play, intensive inquiry, art, philosophy, and relational intimacy.[2]

The second element of the Romantic origins of the dialogic vision of education—that is, its role in social and cultural evolution—flows naturally from the first, and is also signaled in Schiller's "what we should once again become," as well as in Arendt's (1958) concept of natality; in Dewey's pragmatist reconstructionism and more specifically in Count's and Brameld's social reconstructionist movement (for which see Ozmon & Craver, 2008, pp. 158–87); in the history of anarchist education (Suissa, 2010); in critical theory in education; in the contemporary democratic schools movement; and in evolutionary anthropology in the form of the implications of recent brain development research for neoteny theory (i.e. the extraordinarily long human childhood, and pedomorphism as a primary species trait. See Montague, 1989 and Kennedy, 2014). All may be grouped under the Romantic narrative of the dialectical return—a "going forth which is also a

division, and a return which is also a reunion" (Abrams 1971, p. 253). In secular, diachronic terms this could be expressed as cultural evolution—as the reconstruction of cultural practices that leads to the emergence of a critical mass of adults who are more intelligent in the broad sense of a better balance and integration between cognitive and emotional centers, greater cognitive and emotional autonomy, stronger metacognitive and executive function, more flexible and adaptive habits, increased capacity for empathy, and greater sensitivity and identification with the natural environment. Dialogic education is oriented to what Dewey called "a future new society of changed purposes and desires" (p. 96), a more pedomorphic society, which in his terms may be described as one composed of more adults whose habit structures are more adaptive, who are more capable, of ". .. utiliz[ing] . . . [impulses] for formation of new habits, or what is the same thing, the modification of an old habit so that it may be adequately serviceable under novel conditions," who recognize "the place of impulse in conduct as a pivot of re-adjustment, in a steady re-organization of habits to meet new elements in new situations." (1922, p. 104).[3] The guarantor of this reconstruction is a corresponding society that is transitioning to what Marcuse called ". . . a higher stage of development: 'higher' in the sense of a more rational and equitable use of resources, minimization of destructive conflicts, and enlargement of the realm of freedom" (1969, p. 3). This emergent modal personality promises to make possible, in David Graeber's words, ". . . the creation of alternative forms of organization on a world scale, new forms of communication, new, less alienated ways of organizing life, which will, eventually, make currently existing forms of power seem stupid and beside the point" (2004, p. 40).

Dialogic education as a way of thinking about children and childhood and as a set of pedagogical and curricular practices emerged during the same half century as did its antithesis—universal, state-imposed and regulated, compulsory education. Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries the latter developed into an educational system devoted to a form of subjectification in the production of *workers* tooled to take their place in a hierarchical economic system for which the poverty of the many is considered necessary for the wealth of a few; of *citizens* conditioned to tolerate and participate in often corrupt quasi democratic practices that function to maintain that same economic system; of *consumers* conditioned to understand the material conditions imposed by that economic system as the only possible ones; and of so-called "patriots" willing to risk their lives in acts of state-instigated violence and terror—whether in wars or police actions—designed primarily to maintain that system. Dialogic education has, then, historically been working against the grain of standardized mass schooling, not only in its view of the nature, capacities and potentialities of children, but in its economic, political and social views, for which childhood becomes a promissory condition.

Dialogic education has followed its own developmental trajectory from its origins in Pestalozzi's Rousseau-inspired innovations, through the Progressive Education movement and to its current formulation in the democratic education movement, whether as an enemy within the gates of standardized education or as expressed in innumerable alternative forms of schooling or unschooling. I want to highlight several key characteristics, gleaned from all those forms, of the dialogic school, and argue further that community of philosophical inquiry theory and practice as a form of post-Socratic group dialogue, which emerged in the 1970's, is a pedagogical praxis that offers

a grand operational template for dialogic education as a form of schooling. I would not want to claim that the characteristics of dialogic schooling that I identify are necessary and sufficient conditions for dialogic *education* per se—it could be that, whatever the historical and cultural form a school takes, the qualities of intentionality, transitionality, emergence, aesthetic temporality, interdisciplinarity and group deliberation, however encouraged and expressed, can be present. As for the quality of participatory democracy and sharing of power I am not so sure, which raises a whole host of problems that I cannot go into here. The characteristics I identify are as follows.

AN INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

Dialogic education understands school as an *intentional community*, specifically one in the form of an *adult-child collective*. As an intentional community, it is assumed that teaching and learning are two aspects of one process, which is present and operative both among teachers and students; that both understand the community of school as a site dedicated to transformation —personal, epistemological relational, institutional, cultural, and political. Although different capacities, forms of intentionality and different knowledge bases, may be called on by adults and children, they share in the intentional community of school the practice of constructing *new knowledge*, and in the application of that knowledge in the real world. We may connect this common (in school) adult-child project with the Arendtian concept of natality and the Deweyan (and neuroscientific) concept of plasticity: the child embodies the concrete —in the form of actual neuronal networks, brain-based potentiality for new concepts, new understandings of the world— understandings that meet the need for adaptation to a constantly changing environment that we as a species are always facing. As such, the child represents the bridge across the gap between our present ontological and epistemological intuitions and convictions, and intuitions and convictions more suited to our emerging circumstances. The school is the place where both adult and child stand in this gap and work/play—the adult maieutically, the child creatively—on the ongoing reconstruction of our conceptualization of the natural and the social worlds. I understand this to be the basic project of the dialogic school. As such it is a futuristic institution—one that tends to interrupt rather than, as traditional schooling does, reinforce the routinization of daily life and the cultivation of cultural, economic and social fatalism.

A TRANSITIONAL SPACE

As a transitional space, the dialogic school is the site where the reified distinctions between the "real" and the possible are interrupted and interrogated in the course of inquiry. It is most fully entered and expressed through the arts, literature, scientific and mathematic inquiry. Transitional space is the space of the artist's studio and the experimental laboratory, and the magical performative space of music and dance and theatre, as well as the group deliberative space of the kiva or council chamber—the space of what Buber called "meeting." It is the space of "extraordinary investigations," of embodied inquiry, which implies that by definition it is based on themes and topics that are of

real interest to children, of which more in the next section. As a temporal zone, it is what Gadamer (1975, p. 108) calls the "temporality of the aesthetic," which he identifies with "pure presence," and which Dewey (2005) identifies with what he calls "consummatory experience." We may simplify this somewhat by identifying it as a temporal space in which the interplay of the three kinds of lived time that have come to us from the Greek language—chronos, kairos and aion, or clock time, ecstatic time (epiphany, manifestation) and "timeless" time—is not just allowed but encouraged, in the form of a variety of settings and activities, and adults primed for the mediation of children's desire (or "impulse") into meaningful projects. In fact there is a fourth word for a kind of temporality in Greek, which comes to us from Aristotle, and from which our word "school" descends: *skole*, which is typically translated as "leisure," but which is perhaps better understood as "free time." Aristotle (Ackrill, 1987, pp. 538–539; and see the most excellent Masschelein & Simons, 2013) distinguishes this form of lived time from work and from play and relaxation, which represent simply the absence of work. *Skole*, free time, is the time of inquiry, and what contemporary play theorists, from Erikson to Vygotsky to Csikszentmihalyi (2008) would call "deep play," or "flow" today.

The transitional is also the space in which we undertake, by way of critical and creative thinking and inquiry, the deconstruction and reconstruction of our epistemological universe; and we do that across *all* the disciplines. The transitional spaces between chemistry and physics and biology, mathematics, linguistics, anthropology, history, sociology, political science and economics is in fact one polyvocal analogical space. Consider, for example, how an inquiry into the life and habitat of dolphins can involve all of these disciplines, and in such a way that the boundaries of each are pushed, such that we are forced, in this case, to reconsider the deep concepts in neuroscience, theory of language and communication, cognitive theory and intelligence, interspecies communication, and so on. And as I will argue below on the role of CPI, philosophical dialogue is the master-discourse of transitional interdisciplinary space, because it tends to find its way toward concepts that underlie the disciplines—concepts that are, as Splitter and Sharp (1995) have pointed out, common, central and contestable, like for example "fact," or "observation," or "cause," or "proof" or "thinking" itself.

AN EMERGENT CURRICULUM

School as the practice of transitional space implies an *emergent curriculum*, in which the form and content of what is studied is arrived at through teacher-student-parent dialogue and negotiation. In dialogic education, the curriculum must have room to follow up on the further implications it is constantly generating. It must allow for chaotic emergence. This suggests, but does not solely require, a curriculum organized around individual and group projects, as well as thoroughgoing differentiated instruction, allowing for learning through direct instruction, individual research, peer interaction, programmed computer instruction, web-based learning, flipped classroom & etc. The notion of emergent curriculum turns the simplistic but almost universally held notion of curriculum as a fixed body of knowledge to be delivered by a teacher on its head, and renders the role of the teacher an artist or artisan, and a prime interlocutor with children and childhood itself. It offers

one powerful solution to what Freire (1965) called the "teacher-student contradiction," in reconfiguring the two as inquirers, with complementary goals.

A PARTICIPARY DEMOCRACY

School as a child-adult collective and intentional community requires a decision-making structure that allows for the full scope of *deliberative, participatory democracy*. As the democratic schools movement claims, full democratic process, in which power is shared and negotiated by the collective, is a necessary condition for the emergence and success of authentic democratic political forms and practices in the larger culture. Here school is understood in the Deweyan sense of embryonic society, in which adults and children work at what the democratic education movement calls "conscious social reproduction" of a political form, through—again Dewey (1916)—cultivating "social democracy," democratic process taken to the level of everyday life: *direct* democracy. In the dialogic school students themselves, in the company of teachers, investigate and impose sanctions in disciplinary matters, negotiate curriculum, make and remake community rules—in self described democratic schools, this is accomplished through the well-known "weekly meeting"—and deliberate on political issues, both internal and external to the school.

A COMMUNITY OF PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

Finally, I am suggesting that dialogic education finds its most complete form in the overarching, ongoing practice of communal dialogue—a practice that is realized in its most clarified form in *community of philosophical inquiry* (CPI). This assumes an understanding of the practice of philosophy as an ongoing interactive, embodied, polyphonic conversation, dedicated to the reconstruction of beliefs—about self, other, justice, human and animal, god(s), conditions of truth, the nature and status of knowledge claims, ethics and morality, beauty and the good, happiness, the supernatural, technology, and so on. And as suggested above, there is the further assumption that these beliefs underlie/inform/are a dimension of/provide a framework for the universe of concepts through which we approach the disciplines—measurement, fact, truth and validity, causality, objectivity, falsifiability, and so on. In the dialogic school, CPI is the master-practice that trains us in the critical, creative and valuing skills and dispositions with which we reconstruct the disciplines as we inquire, thus breaking down the historical barriers between them; with which we govern our intentional community through deep democratic process; and through which we pursue the ongoing clarification of belief and the interrogation of philosophical assumptions that promises a reconstruction of epistemological and ontological convictions that better match an emergent future. CPI is where the various narratives of the members of the school community intersect and where they are voiced. As such it is a collective "sounding" space and a space of intersubjective revelation. It is also an epistemological space in which those new meanings that emerge from the *skole* (the free time) of the dialogic school open up to view—new ways of understanding the natural world and our

relation to it, new ways of understanding the potential and the limits of direct democracy, and new ways of understanding the relationship between knowledge and action.

As I have already argued, it is conceivable that the characteristics of dialogic education described here could be expressed in any given traditional form of schooling in less conscious and systematic ways; and it is probable that even in a traditional school some teachers, given a modicum of professional autonomy, will incorporate one or more of these characteristics in their individual classrooms, thus leading to a mixed picture. Perhaps what I am trying to articulate here is the Platonic "form" of the dialogic school. On the other hand, Platonic forms are by definition unrealizable in the material world, whereas these characteristics are and have been realizable. Many further questions remain. Is there one characteristic that cannot be done without—participatory democracy, perhaps? How much, having one, does one have the others—that is, how mutually implicative are they? How vulnerable are they to the perverse contingencies of human embodiment; for example, are they at risk when a teacher or a school has a "bad year," or a "bad group" of children? Do they in fact represent limit conditions, unattainable in everyday practice, and thus indeed must be characterized as a Platonic form? Do they translate across history and culture, and if not, how liable are they to culturally relativist critique? How liable to the post-modern critique of humanism (Biesta, 2006)? And no doubt more questions remain. Meanwhile, how concretely applicable are they to the "real" world? That is, could they be implemented tomorrow in a setting with sufficient resources, by individuals who fully understood them and were committed to their realization? It seems to me that the history of dialogic education, from its inception as counterpoint to mass, state imposed and regulated schooling to its current expressions today, is testimony both to its practicability and its durability, grounded as it is, not just in lived experience, but in the evolutionary aspirations of the human species.

ENDNOTES

1. For a more complete discussion of this concept, see my "Child and Fool in the Western Wisdom Tradition," in Kennedy 2006b, pp. 45-68.

2. Again, see Kennedy 2006a and 2006b for a fuller discussion.

3. This ideal could also be stated, following Winnicott (1971), as an adult who is more capable of negotiating "transitional space," and following Schiller (1965), as an adult who is more sensitive to the "play impulse," which in Marcuse's rendition is related to the emergence of "sensuous reason."

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