

GROUP TIME CONVERSATION IN A PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM: EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES

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This article presents results from an ethnographic investigation of group time in a preschool classroom. The teacher in this classroom was selected because of her commitment to and success at group time. Group time presents unique opportunities for socially constructed learning through rich dialogue. It is mutually and reciprocally constructed by the teacher and the children. To show the complexity of the teacher's efforts at group time, we make the teacher's hidden work visible by discussing three strategies: becoming ready for conversation, exchanging contextualization cues, and using different types of group conversation. Rich and meaningful learning at group time becomes possible through the mutual efforts and support of the teacher, children, and parents.

It is only through communication, through the mutual acting of man upon man, that the man [sic] within a man unfolds for one-self as well as for others. To be—that means to communicate in a dialogue. (Bakhtin, 1967, cited in Ignjatovic-Savic, Kovac-Cerovic, Plut, & Pesikan, 1988, p. 89)

Communication is essential to human life. In this article we use the term conversation rather than communication or dialogue to emphasize the everyday nature of human communication. During the course of conversation, as Bakhtin argues, one unfolds for one-self as well as for others. Seen in this way, conversation becomes an essential factor in human development.

Bruner (1990) noted that "pedagogy is an extension of conversation" and that (citing Donaldson) "failure is a perverse inability of teacher and student to come to terms with the communication

problem" (p. x). Pianta and Walsh (1996) contended that seeing schooling as "communication forces us to see its interactional or transactional nature and to see it as conversation requires us to attend to all parties involved" (p. 25). Too often, they added, schooling remains a monologue.

School should be a place where less experienced learn from more experienced. Through conversation knowledge is displayed, shared, explored, transmitted, exchanged, or co-constructed. Conversation, therefore, in its daily enactment between teacher and students in classroom deserves careful study.

This study is about group time in a preschool classroom where group conversation actually takes place. Group time, commonly referred to as large-group time, circle time, meeting time, or opening, is one of the routines that is typical in preschool classrooms (Brown, 1993; McAfee, 1985). As it involves the whole class, it might be more accurately referred to as "whole-class" time. We use "group time" because Elaine, the teacher in this study, often used the term, and for brevity.

Several researchers have looked at group time in preschools (Cazden, 1988; Fernie, Kantor, Scott, Schwarz, Kesner & Klein, 1990; Kantor, Elgas, & Fernie, 1989; Lynch, Widley, & Johnson, 1988; Wallat & Green, 1978). The major findings across these studies were that the same few activities dominate and that teachers perceive group time as promoting children's socialization to school, but that the purpose is managerial, that is, reinforcing classroom rules and routines. Although the findings ring true, we will add the caution few researchers have tried to explore teachers' perspectives about how they think about, plan, and conduct group activities (McAfee, 1985; Staab 1986). An important purpose of this study is to get at group time from the teacher's perspective.

Much research done in schools has investigated the structure of lessons based on pseudo-questions, that is, questions by the teacher seeking a single already determined answer (Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman, & Smith, 1966; Flanders, 1970; Mehan, 1979/1985; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Burbules (1993) pointed out that a lesson structured on pseudo questions is based on "a very narrow conception of knowledge and a lack of commitment to truly open-ended and exploratory dialogue" (p. 153). He cautioned that "a management-driven conception of the teacher's role becomes not a means to educational ends, but ends in and of themselves" (p. 153). For Ayers (1993) such a conception presents a view of "teaching as clerking" (p. 5).