

***TEACHER IDENTITY AND DIALOGUE:  
A COMMENT ON VAN RIJSWIJK, AKKERMAN & KOSTER***

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ABSTRACT. Van Rijswijk et al. limit themselves to a descriptive interpretation of dialogism: they have analysed the *form* of the student discourses, but they have given scant attention to the *normative* side. The question remains as to whether, for instance, the students have developed an identity that is itself prone to either a more authoritative or a more dialogical teaching style. It would be interesting to see whether they have developed an openness to differences, are themselves able to ask critical questions, can encourage the asking of such questions by their students, and/or whether they have a critical perspective on the world of education. These aspects are absent in the present analysis of Van Rijswijk et al.

KEYWORDS: dialogism, teacher identity, normative approach

The study by Van Rijswijk, Akkerman and Koster is an interesting attempt to understand the development of the professional identity of teachers from the point of view of dialogism theory. They show that dialogue is indeed important in the development of a teacher's professional identity. The study also opens a whole field of other possible studies – far more than the authors seem to realize. I will point out some of the limitations of their study in order to show some further research possibilities. To do so, I will need to clarify some elements of dialogism as I understand it.

Like many concepts in social theories, 'dialogue' and 'dialogism' may be interpreted in two ways: as descriptive and as normative concepts (Renshaw 2004, p. 13). They are descriptive in the sense that theories of dialogism, including the theory of the dialogical self, suppose that all speaking and thinking, and for that matter acting, are to some degree predicated on the speaking and acting of others, are concretely situated, and are addressed to an (real or imagined) audience. Everything we say or do is influenced by such factors as our social position and that of the individuals to whom we speak, by our understanding of the situation and its history, by cultural norms, and other such factors. Such a theoretical lens contributes to a better understanding of human nature – although the last term would seem inadequate here, as according to this view

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there is nothing 'natural' about the essence of human beings, a point that has been variously emphasized by Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and others. The normative side of such concepts arises from the idea that if dialogue is so central to human existence, enhancing the quality of dialogues is likely to enhance the quality of human existence and of living together. Even in the call for proposals for this special issue this double nature of the concepts is evident, as the need for better dialogue in education is coupled with an analysis of the changing conditions of human co-existence in our times.

In Bakhtin's use of the terms 'authoritative' versus 'internally persuasive' discourse, the latter is almost automatically interpreted as better; indeed Bakhtin intended these terms to have a normative character. Although he calls the former 'monological', Bakhtin does not mean to say that it is not dialogical in the descriptive sense, as it necessarily contains ideas and voices of others. It is, rather, monological and authoritative in the way it impacts, or is supposed to impact, the listener. The speaker uses authority 'external' to the dialogue, authority of his person or position, or even of the 'undisputable facts', to make the listener accept his position. However, it is not at all certain that the one listening will indeed accept this authority without comment, as there may still be a space for making his own sense out of the speaker's contribution. It is therefore quite difficult to totally exclude the possibility of sense-making, although, as both Bakhtin and Wertsch (1991:78) point out, education traditionally has done a good job of suppressing it and thus has historically tended towards authoritative discourse.

Conversely, in the 'internally persuasive' discourse it is exactly its dialogical quality that foregrounds the hearer's sense-making instead of the transmission of undisputable facts. Dialogue presupposes the existence and acceptance of differences (Renshaw 2004), and the intention not to eliminate such differences but to try and take them to a higher level, to a new synthesis – which implies that new differences may emerge at that higher level (see, however, Burbules 2000 for a criticism of this idea). Such a dialogue does not necessarily take place between actual participants, as is clear from the theory in its 'descriptive' moment: the use others made of the concepts used, the social position of earlier speakers, and many other elements play a role. Participants in such a discourse, however, are (supposedly) aware of such elements and dialogically reflect on them. A continuing dialogue, therefore, does depend on the ability and willingness of the participants to ask the right, mostly critical, questions, and to develop skills for autonomous inquiry (Van Oers 2012) – an ability that itself depends on having adequate (background) knowledge. However, in most cases, and certainly in educational situations, such knowledge is not equally accessible, and it is in the nature of education that teachers have a different role in a dialogue than students do (Thompson 2012) – even when they do not tend, whether because of their greater knowledge or as a result of the strength of their institutional position, to close down arguments by using their authority. This is one reason why in education, the internally persuasive discourse can only be an ideal type.

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Many authors (e.g. Holland et al. 1998) have interpreted personal identity as dialogical, a (mostly verbal) rendition of who one considers oneself to be in a particular situation and for a particular audience. It should be clear from the above that this dialogue too will have elements of the internally persuasive as well as of the authoritative. Moreover, the development over time of this picture of oneself will be influenced by the dialogues in which one engages or is engaged. Constructing an identity is, in this view, an on-going struggle, in which one strives for coherence but also continually encounters new differences and contradictions, some of them created by the nature of the identity development itself. It is a continuous learning process, in which one learns about oneself and one's relationship to others and to the world. But also, ideally, one learns to learn – to be more aware of differences, of possibilities and restrictions, and to engage in identity dialogues that are more 'internally persuasive'.

Theories of dialogical education imply that students can be helped in this process of learning to learn, and in developing a more dialogically oriented identity, by providing them with experiences in having internally persuasive dialogues: encouraging students, for instance, not to expect absolute truths from teachers or books, to ask critical questions and to develop an inquisitive attitude. In that sense, dialogical education is essentially normative in the sense I used earlier. But then, in my view all education is a normative and moral enterprise. Of course, research is needed to see whether such expectations for dialogic education are justified.

From this sketched outline of the theory, I will point out some possibilities for further study that would be open to the present authors. My comments focus on two aspects of the study: the means used to access the identity-related dialogues of the teacher students, and the way these are analysed.

The authors have used portfolio texts written by the students, prompted by their teacher educators. One consequence of this choice is that we can only see dialogues as rendered by the students – in fact, at best we can read an internal dialogue. Given the situation in which these texts were written, however, students know that their portfolio contributions will be read and possibly evaluated by their educators, therefore we cannot be sure that they indeed represent only an 'internally persuasive discourse' for the students – wanting to be liked or approved of, and thus authoritative discourse, in this socially unequal situation is almost certain to be present. The authors are aware of this, as they write: "Self-narratives about oneself as a teacher that are directed at the supervising teacher educator will then always to some extent echo the voice of this educator and the beliefs and values he or she holds about being a teacher." However, for the authors this is evidently not a reason to doubt the 'internally persuasive' character of the texts. By labelling the texts a priori as renditions of an 'internally persuasive' discourse, the authors have precluded the opportunity to find out just how internally persuasive the texts really are – that is, to what extent they express ideas that the students really hold at the moment of writing. As it may be difficult to do so with

portfolio texts alone, future research might use other data sources. But one might surmise that explicit references to significant others, especially in the 'authorisation' mode discerned by the authors, could be indications of a way of thinking that has traces of the authoritative discourse. Here it is important to remember that virtually no actual discourse can be either totally authoritative or totally internally persuasive.

Something along the same lines may be said about one of the main findings of the study: the use by the students of four dialogical strategies. Here, too, it should be kept in mind that these strategies are not 'natural' but form part of the cultural, possibly even the institutional environment of the students: they have, one way or another, been learned, maybe even as part of the curriculum. Whether any of these strategies is 'better', or whether using more of them is 'better', remains to be seen.

As opposed to an authoritative discourse, the internally persuasive one is never closed, the dialogue never completely ends. Therefore, looking at such a discourse is, as the authors assert, a good means for following the development of the teacher students' identity. But what will be revealed is as much dependent on the definition of 'identity' and its development as it is on the richness of the data. And here, I think a more encompassing view is possible, even indicated, on two counts. In the first place, identity is not just a discourse about oneself; it is a discourse about oneself in relation to one's (personal and professional) environment. It is not only about one's relationship with students, but also about the social and institutional position one has as a teacher, about one's relationship to the academic discipline(s) one teaches, about how one values differences, and many additional aspects. This implies that the questions the teacher educators have asked the respondents to answer are unnecessarily limiting, and the texts the students wrote are about only one aspect of their identities as teachers.

More importantly, in the theory guiding this analysis, the authors stress that the most important element in the development of identity is reaching some sort of coherence. Coherence, however, is only one side of that development; the other side is that one always discovers new differences, challenges and possibilities. Dialogue never stops but always gives rise to new questions. Coherence by itself may also be reached by limiting the number of issues on which one constructs one's feeling of identity, thus in effect stopping development. Therefore, future research might take both reaching coherence and the scope of identity stories into account.

This brings me to what I see as my most important point and how that might inform future research which would take this study a few steps further. In concentrating on the development of coherence as evidenced in the texts written by the student teachers, the authors have, as I understand their strategy, tried to confine themselves to a descriptive interpretation of dialogism. What I mean by that is that they have analysed the *form* of the student discourses, and there they have done a laudable job. But they have given scant attention to the *normative* side, the question of whether, for instance,

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the students have developed an identity that is itself prone to either a more authoritative or a more dialogical teaching style. It would be interesting to see, for example, whether they have developed an openness to differences, are able themselves to ask critical questions, can encourage the asking of such questions by their students, and whether they have a critical perspective on the world of education. Such aspects are totally absent from the present analysis. Paying attention to the normative side would help us to see to what degree the aims of teacher education are being achieved – aims which are not just focused on enabling students to develop a coherent identity but an identity in which helping and stimulating their students to develop an adequate identity in our present times is of central importance.

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