

***MONOLOGUE TO DIALOGUE: EDUCATION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY***  
***INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE***

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper argues that there is a need for a dialogical learning space because soft skills are becoming increasingly important in an ever more unstable labour market. Where once a monological form of education worked to prepare youth for the future, now a dialogue is required. This dialogue, by definition or in the first place seek consensus, but assumes pluralism and even conflict and is thereby intended to be a true departure from the monological nature of education.

**KEYWORDS:** dialogical learning space, soft skills, intrinsic motivation

In the Western world, mass education was established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as industrial production became dominant and populations became urbanized as a result. Its purpose was twofold (Karabel & Halsey, 1976): to socialize individuals into society and to assign people a rank on the societal ladder (i.e. selection). The actual qualifications required to do particular work were primarily learned on the job and not in the institutions providing mass education. And although formal education allowed for greater upward mobility for many, the role of education – according to educational sociologists like Bowles & Gintis (1976) – was still to have people conform to the industrial way of production and the culture of the white middle class. Mass education in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century therefore did not need to be dialogical. In ‘industrial education’ a monological culture dominated, which meant that:

- on the micro level the interaction between teacher and students was dominated by transfer of “indisputable” knowledge and middle-class values;
- on the meso level the interaction between teachers and school managers was dominated by questions of management and control;
- on the macro level the interaction between schools and their environment was dominated by prescriptions that assumed that even education and educational outcomes should be standardized (i.e. subject to industrial-like quality control)

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### **In search of meaning**

By the mid 1960s however, it became clear that the social context within which people had been living was changing; the greater individualisation of society (Giddens, 1991) had given people, especially youngsters, more space to make their own decisions. There was no longer a kind of ‘standard’ biography (Beck, 1986) therefore many youngsters experienced less direction and identity because the ‘grand narratives’ that had helped individuals and groups to position themselves rapidly disappeared (Wijers & Meijers, 1996). Parents and teachers became afraid to give direction to the lives of children or students, in part because they themselves had lost sight of the social developments and because they were told that the rate of the change was so rapid that the transfer of their own values and standards would reduce their children/students’ capacity to adjust. Middle-class parents took their refuge in endless negotiations with their children (Ehrenreich, 1989), while teachers withdrew to the seemingly neutral fortresses of knowledge that had traditionally made the exchange of knowledge for order possible (Grotenhuis & Meijers, 1994). Additionally, teachers refused to take over pedagogical responsibility from parents.

In other words, although the societal revolution that started in the 1960s began to change the needs of the learner as well-established norms, values, and power structures were questioned and even rejected, education remained largely monological and this reality continues in schools to this day (Winters et al., 2009, 2012). In previous decades this was possible because the labour market remained fairly stable and most jobs were still distinct and definable. If one developed one’s skills, one could match those to a particular job or vocation, which meant that following the route of the ‘standard biography’ with regards to completing one’s education (i.e. getting a diploma) still yielded positive results on the labour market. This meant that teachers weren’t under pressure to create a more dialogical learning environment or to guide students in how they might give shape to their lives.

It is only recently that this gap in education is being recognized and although a diploma remains a key factor to societal success, other, more dialogical skills are now needed. Employers are looking for graduates with the so-called soft (social) skills where once the emphasis was on technical skills (Cedefop, 2010; Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Leckey & McGuigan, 1997). Governments have recognized the demand for soft skills enthusiastically, without realising, however, that the development of soft skills requires a different learning environment than the development of traditional technical skills (Payne, 2000; Smith & Comyn, 2004). Researchers in the field of career development have begun to identify an additional set of ‘career competencies’ needed to succeed at school and in life, which include things like self-reflection, exploration of one’s passion, and networking skills (Kuijpers & Scheerens, 2006; Kuijpers, Schyns & Scheerens, 2006). These competencies can only be learned, as is demonstrated by research (Kuijpers,

Meijers & Gundy, 2011; Kuijpers & Meijers, 2012), by creating an educational environment that fosters real conversations – in other words: a dialogical learning space.

The underlying dimension of the soft skills wanted by employers is intrinsic motivation: the core of employability is the ability to show commitment to work and the employer in changing times (Hillage, Regan, Dickson & McLoughlin, 2002; Lafer, 2004; Schulz, 2008). The absence of dialogue and the subsequent lack of control by students over their own learning processes, however, results in students' lack of intrinsic motivation with regards to their studies. Most students in fact have a purely instrumental relationship with the curriculum (Holt, 1995; Franciosi, 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2007) as well as their teachers (Hargreaves, 2003; Prawat, 1998). Students see no other choice but to reproduce 'the logic of the system' which means they continue to count on the promise that investment in education (i.e. a certification) alone will ultimately pay off (Gatto, 2009).

At the same time teachers still feel disempowered when it comes to guiding students in finding (or creating) their work or place within society. Kuijpers, Meijers & Gundy (2011) and Kuijpers & Meijers (2012) did research into careers guidance and counselling in Dutch vocational education. Teachers reported that the conversations they had with students are usually about school progress and barely about self and future. It was notable that 40% of the teachers felt that their work as career teachers was not well-supported by either the school or by other professionals working in the field; 63% of teachers reported that they receive almost no support from their managers and colleagues and 54% of teachers reported that they receive almost no support from employers or other professionals. Teachers also maintain that in the current climate there is hardly room for a pedagogical approach; everything is aimed at measurable outcomes. Nussbaum (2010) also identifies this problem and what may be at the root of it: 'Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive.' The skills being referred to are people skills, imagination, empathy, and an ability to reflect critically about oneself and society. Again, these are competencies that are learned in conversations about real life and work experiences – acquired and developed within a dialogical learning space and required by citizens in a democratic society.

### **Towards meaningful education**

Schools are increasingly acknowledging that they have a strong responsibility in guiding children and students not only in their academic growth, but also in preparing and supporting their 'life design' (Savickas et al., 2010). Teachers need to prepare students for participation in a rapidly changing society, which as mentioned above requires the development of dialogical skills. This is one of the reasons that the role of teachers is changing, both in society and in schools. An appeal is being made to

teachers to cultivate their self-directive abilities and to act on their joint responsibility in stimulating and guiding students during their school career (Law, Meijers & Wijers, 2002). Such changes have an impact on the professional identity of teachers (Day, 2002), which is another area that can be supported by dialogue, as we shall see in several of the subsequent articles. Positive teacher identity learning only happens within schools that operate as strong learning environments, allowing for experiential learning and providing a communicative structure, where learners are invited to reflect on their experiences (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005). Creating these conditions is crucial for educational change; it is not so much about changing organizational structures but about changing professional culture within those structures which often results in the change of existing structures; in this way dialogical learning makes bottom-up changes possible.

In order for education to be truly meaningful for students and teachers alike, educational environments must be developed where (a) experiential learning is considered key (b) conversations take place about the personal and societal meaning of concrete experiences in all life domains, and (c) theoretical knowledge is offered “just in time and just enough” based on questions that students and teachers need to have an answer to (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). This requires a dialogue on all levels of education:

- on a micro-level where students are invited to transform all sorts of information into knowledge in a constructive way that is meaningful to them;
- on the meso-level where transformational leadership and collective learning is needed in order to create new professional identities and – as a result – strong learning environments that makes co-construction possible;
- on a macro-level where public discourse should take place in which the role of education in society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is negotiated and the means by which this can be realized are discussed.

### **The contributions**

The articles in this issue and the critical reviews on those articles offer theoretical and practical ideas about what this dialogue and the dialogical classroom space might look like. Additionally, what the contributors to this issue propose and identify as the issues, enhances our understanding of the challenges teachers face in the classroom, both in their learning processes with students as in reflecting on their own (evolving) identities. What is also clear from the issues raised and the responses proposed is that the dialogue required does not, by definition or in the first place seek consensus, but assumes pluralism and even conflict (Chiva, Alegre & Lapedra, 2007; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) and is thereby intended to be a true departure from the monological nature of education.

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In the first article “School Culture, Struggling Adolescent Readers, and the Dialogical Self,” Dawan Coombs examines the narratives told by Sarah, a struggling adolescent reader, about her reading abilities. A series of in-depth interviews and observations reveal Sarah’s perceptions of herself, her experiences in school, and reading. An analysis of her stories demonstrates the role of the dialogical self in the plotment of her narratives and indicates extensive dialogues with the larger school culture. Understanding the role school culture plays in the narrative identities of struggling readers offers opportunities to recognize discourses that alienate students who learn differently. These understandings also offer teachers and researchers opportunities to question current practices and the extent to which they support students of all ability levels.

In his critical review of Coombs piece, Luken concludes that the changes Sarah went through can be explained in several ways. One of them is through Dialogical Self Theory and the transformation of a debilitating identity. But there could also have been flaws in the technical reading lessons she received at the start of her school career or in maturation processes, influencing motivation and her capacity. Nevertheless Coombs' interpretation leads to some appealing and important implications for practices in education:

- be careful with self-directed procedures of turn-taking, where smart kids pick smart kids for the next turn or less smart kids lose the turn very quickly
- encourage collaboration rather than competition
- give students opportunities to choose texts themselves
- be careful with labels; they have lasting power

In the second article “Student Teachers’ Internally Persuasive Borderland Discourse and Teacher Identity,” Van Rijswijk, Akkerman and Koster stress that learning to become a teacher entails developing a coherent teacher identity. They introduce the notion of internally persuasive borderland discourse (IPBD) as a means to study the development of teacher identity during teacher education. Using a grounded theory approach in analysing the IPBDs of 10 student teachers participating in a post-graduate university teacher education programme, they found that the voices of significant others in the IPBDs were used for authorisation, as embodiment of the nature of teaching and as a marker of good teaching. They also found that the student teachers used four dialogical strategies in the IPBDs, labelled as ‘personal discourse’, ‘intentional discourse’, ‘developmental discourse’ and ‘non-fit discourse’. Overlooking the 10 IPBDs they distinguish two types of teacher identity narrations: (1) goal-oriented narration; and (2) explorative narration. Both types of narratives testify to the efforts student teachers put into developing a convincing image of themselves as teachers.

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In his comment on this contribution, Wardekker stresses that the four dialogical strategies the authors distinguish, are not 'natural' but form part of the cultural, possibly even the institutional environment of the students. They have, in one way or another, been learned, maybe even as part of the curriculum. Whether any of these strategies is 'better' than another or whether using more of them is 'better', remains to be seen. In Wardekker's opinion, the authors have tried to 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. According to Wardekker, 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 were absent in the present analysis.

In the third contribution "Unlocking the Potential of Conflicts: A Pilot Study of Professional Identity Development Facilitation During Initial Teacher Education," Äli Leijen and Katrin Kullasepp describe the results of support seminars for professional identity development. The main aim of the support was to facilitate negotiations and resolve tensions between student teachers' professional and personal I-positions. Professional identity development support data were collected by means of written assignments from 11 students drawn from two teacher training curricula during school practicum seminars at one university in Estonia. The results revealed that the support seminars developed were functional for communicating tensions between conflicting positions and partly functional for solving tensions between positions.

In her review, Winters starts with Leijen and Kullasepp's conclusion that the support seminars they developed were partly useful (as not all students were able to identify and solve tensions between personal and professional positions and thus come to an integration), but need to be developed further. This development needs to include an integration of perspectives whereby the tensions between different I-positions and any linked meta-positions are categorized and then debriefed. This would lead to teacher/mentor interventions aimed at having students formulate a promoter-position as a form of higher-order integration with regards to their personal and professional selves.

In the fourth contribution "Freire, Bakhtin, and Collaborative Pedagogy: A Dialogue with Students and Mentors," Stewart and McClure argue that an individual's social position within an organization creates situations where some people have more opportunity to take the role of power holder than do others. The authors have embraced this concept and engaged in self-study to examine their teaching experiences to develop an understanding of the ways in which dialogue between students, teachers, and their theoretical mentors can make teaching and learning a more collaborative and equitable effort. This article focuses on how engaging in philosophical dialogue with mentors and

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viewing students as co-creators of knowledge and pedagogy can enhance teaching and learning and nourish teachers who are working through the constraints teachers encounter as a result of *Standards Era* policies.

Lengelle argues in her review of Stewart & McClure's article that the authors have inspiring views on how teachers can create more opportunity to take the role of power holder. But whether these views are indeed an answer to the constraints of "standardization and high-stakes accountability" and "the conservative restoration of market reforms" is not resolved or entirely convincing. However, that teachers will experience less isolation by engaging their students and the voices of theoretical mentors is promising and the more who hear about it, the more it might keep the status quo from maintaining its monological grip.

In the last article, entitled "Globalization, Localization, Uncertainty and Wobble: Implications for Education," Fecho unpacks what Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) have cited as the gift or dread of uncertainty, and the role dialogue plays in navigating that uncertainty. Working from a Bakhtinian stance, he asks educators to wonder about the ways the local and global respond to each other and how we, through our many I-positions respond to both. As the field of education struggles to catch-up with ever-burgeoning technology that brings the world and our uncertainties about the world to the fore, this article theorizes about the role of uncertainty in the classroom, particularly as it occurs at the intersection of the global and the local. As teachers and students venture into dialogically primed spaces, they often do so with questions and doubt. It is in such spaces where what he calls wobble happens, an indication that change is occurring and attention should be paid. When forces of globalization and localization transact in classrooms, wobble and uncertainty plays out. The idea is to open a dialogue on dialogue and unpack how learners and teachers might come to see uncertainty as an experiential feature of a self in action. Ultimately, he concludes the article with suggestions for educators and policymakers about what to expect when they move dialogical self practice into educational settings.

In his review of this article, Wijers makes a case for dialogue in the classroom. It is argued that dialogue can bridge contradictions that we are faced with as a result of the globalization process. It is increasingly important that education takes this message to heart and aims to raise citizens; it is essential that young people learn to become attuned to the beauty and aesthetics inherent in dialogue and are not merely brought up to focus on succeeding on the labour market or to see culture as another consumer product. The review discusses what dialogue is and how a dialogical space is created by taking on myriad I- and we-positions and switching between them – even playfully. Finally dialogue is also about developing one's talent, imagining optimistic possible futures, and addressing conflicts by getting to know others viewpoints; dialogue is both clarifying and creative and essential to the development of individuals and the collective in a civilized society.

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In this special issue, the authors each contribute theories and ideas that make a dialogical learning space more conceivable and practically possible. Their thinking and creative work offer inspiration and constructive ways in which we can respond to the issues that increasing individualization and globalization present us with. When our response to issues discussed is a dialogical one, uncertainty and insecurity become part of what intrinsically motivates us, not only in the way we help individual students, but in the way our learning environment becomes a space for the learning that is required in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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