Listening to Children in Dialogue

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Abstract

In this appreciative response to Jennifer Hauver's article about elementary children's negotiation of analytic frames in deliberative dialogue during input into a school governance decision, Bickmore argues for the value of such agentic, citizenship-relevant learning opportunities in public schools. She points to their unfortunate infrequency (to the detriment of socially just democracy) in economically and racially marginalized communities. The concept of analytic frames is compared with the notion of interests—desires, needs, concerns, and ethical principles—underlying each party's proposals in integrative negotiated conflict resolution theory. Questions are raised about the roles played by cultural context and status inequalities within dialogue groups. Bickmore concludes that both Hauver's research methodology and her pedagogy of listening intently to children show enormous potential for enhancing transformative democratic education.

This article is in response to

Hauver, J. "State your defense!" Children negotiate analytic frames in the context of deliberative dialogue." *Democracy & Education*, 25(2), Article 3. Available at: http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol25/iss2/3

INCLUSIVE, THOUGHTFUL-LISTENING DIALOGUE and deliberation are key ingredients of democratic citizenship, especially in this era of social-political polarization and disengagement. Dialogic decision-making is also key to restorative peacemaking (meaning conflict resolution and repair of relationships) and sustainable peacebuilding (meaning social transformation for just and democratic peace)—underappreciated aspects of democracy (education) in the global North, necessary for redressing injustice and repairing harmful social relations, for instance around fundamental social conflicts such as indigenous rights, environmental conservation, and economic inequality.

Dialogue is a communication process that aims to build relationships between people as they share experiences, ideas and information about a common concern. It also aims to help groups take in more information and perspectives than they previously had as they attempt to forge a new and broader understanding of a situation . . . Dialogue is a unique communication process because it focuses participants' attention on listening for understanding. (Schirch & Campt, 2007, pp. 6–7)

I am happy to see a research article addressing children's understandings about their social world, and examining an opportunity for children to practice such dialogue, and its consequences, in a public elementary school.

Hauver's (2017) "'State Your Defense!' Children Negotiate Analytic Frames in the Context of Deliberative Dialogue" reflects careful listening to children's talk as they carried out such agentic collective decision-making dialogue.

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Specifically, Hauver listened to five small groups of 9–11-year-olds in one urban school in an economically marginalized area, interviewed each of the 20 children before and after their deliberations, and analyzed videotapes of their interactions. Each group of children engaged in a deliberation session regarding an ill-structured (open-ended) problem: the allocation of resources for new playground equipment. This democratic talk reflected conflicting views embedded in students' agency to influence their lived curriculum. Hauver's goal was to understand how these children negotiated contrasting analytic frames—the ethical principles or interests underlying their and peers' proposals and arguments—and how their perspectives or understandings changed (or did not) through the experience of deliberating with peers. Her paper includes pithy specifics regarding her analytical method, which add value to the work.

Access to Citizenship-Relevant Active Learning Opportunities

Opportunities for dialogic exchange among peers regarding meaningful (conflictual) open questions are rare but, when they occur, can be valuable and memorable for students (Hughes, Print, & Sears, 2010; Peck, Thompson, Chareka, Joshee, & Sears, 2010; Simon, 2001). Prior research shows a significant association between access to participation in civic learning activities—including open discussion of conflictual questions in an inclusive climate, student governance and community service—and democratic citizenship outcomes such as inclination and capacity to vote and participate (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010, pp. 244, 251).

Hauver examines one such activity: students' deliberative process generating input into a school governance decision. Her study responds to the need for research about students' opportunities for constructive dialogue around the many kinds of small and even routine conflicts embedded or implied in interpersonal interaction, classroom and school governance, and curriculum subject matter and pedagogies (Apple, 1979; Bickmore, 2012; Gill & Niens, 2014; Parker, 2006; Ugarriza & Nussio, 2016), to complement the more numerous studies about controversial political issues discussion (in) education (Bajaj, 2014; Bellino, 2015; du Preez, 2014; Hanna, 2017; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Quaynor, 2015). At the same time, Hauver's paper described an apparently nonroutine supplementary activity, disconnected from ordinary classroom curriculum: While we can learn much from this example, it does dodge the difficult problem of integrating such meaningful dialogue into regularly available pedagogies (Bickmore, 2013).

Unfortunately, such high-quality participatory citizenship learning opportunities are relatively less common in economically and racially marginalized communities (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008), although they can make a disproportionate difference there (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). So, it is especially important that Hauver's initiative took place in a public school in a high-poverty community. Kahne, Crowe, and Lee (2013) demonstrated the value of opportunities for students to exercise agency and to discuss political-moral questions in such public schools, to build their capacity, experience, and commitment toward "little p" (community engagement) as well as "big P" (formal governance) politics.

Perhaps due to the small sample, unfortunately the participating students' (a)typicality in their school population, academic status, or racialized identities are not mentioned. Gender can be discerned from their pseudonyms. Hauver (2017) mentioned Bourdieu's notion of (unequal) linguistic resource exchange in a field or "market" (p. 11) and cited prior research indicating that lower-status identity groups, such as girls and African American children, may develop fluency with alternate perspectives sooner than their peers (p. 4). Yet this is a challenge, not a guarantee.

It would be nice to know more about such peer status dynamics in the deliberations examined, as differences and inequalities would tend to impact the understandings students contribute to their groups and whose voices are influential (Barton, 2015; Navarro Hernández, Romo González, & Vázquez Sánchez, 2013; Souto-Manning, 2014; Uptin, Wright, & Harwood, 2016; Young, 2007). As I learned in an earlier study, intentionally designed task structures, in addition to opportunities to engage constructively with conflict, can improve inclusiveness and equity in student dialogue (Bickmore, 2014; Bickmore & Kovalchuk, 2012; Bickmore & Parker, 2014).

Conflict (Resolution) Education: Learning Integrative, Interest-Based Negotiation

Hauver (2017) noted the "opportunities for negotiation" that arose in the observed conversations, when children suggested analytic frames for consideration, underlying or justifying their own proposals for how the playground equipment problem should be handled. She also noted each "conversational turn" in which students asserted, ignored, contested, or echoed peers'

framing of the problem (p. 8). Hauver found that participants' pre-to-post gains in fluency for addressing the conflictual question (their use of language to recognize and explain their own reasons, values, or thinking process) were highest when they were exposed to multiple frames during their deliberation conversations. This makes sense, and it indirectly suggests principles for feasible pedagogies that could make a difference.

What Hauver (2017) called "frames," in this context, are very similar to what conflict resolution and negotiation specialists call "interests," meaning the needs, desires, and ethical principles underlying and motivating the demands or positions taken by each negotiator (Fisher & Shapiro, 2005; Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991). Hauver's findings agree with conflict resolution theory, that what she calls "subordinate" (self interest, distributive) frames tend to be less powerfully persuasive than "super-ordinate" (shared interest, integrative) frames—such as, in these children's deliberations, fairness, safety, and common good.

> *Integrative bargaining focuses on developing mutually beneficial agreements based on the interests of the disputants. Interests include the needs, desires, concerns, and fears important to each side. They are the underlying reasons why people become involved in a conflict . . . There are often many interests behind any one position. If parties focus on identifying those interests, they will increase their ability to develop win-win solutions (Spangler, 2003, p. 1).*

In Hauver's study, the student groups that identified and legitimized shared interests (super-ordinate frames) were able to reach consensus on how to solve the problem. Most of the groups (except one that reached a premature, thin consensus) were able, through their deliberative process, to articulate and to take into account (that is, to integrate) a widened range of interests (frames) to inform children's thinking about the problem.

Hauver (2017) found one shared-interest frame, "fairness," to be a particularly resonant concern in students' conflict deliberation. When fairness principles were agreed upon sufficiently to prevail over self-interest arguments, this seemed to work as a sort of tipping point that enabled further negotiation toward consensus. Once fairness (justice) questions were resolved, children often proceeded to find "common good" solutions involving compatible interests among stakeholders. Thus, value judgments and feelings enmeshed with thinking and communicative skills.

School-based conflict resolution education research and practice, based on such integrative conflict theory, demonstrate the principles of effective dialogue that Hauver (2017) advocated. Creative, value-based, and analytical thinking capacities and inclinations (such as openness, listening, and seeking common ground) for recognizing and negotiating such integrative solutions can be successfully taught, learned, and practiced in the context of curricular subject matter and in cocurricular democratic peace-making roles such as peer mediation (Bickmore, 2002, 2003; Carter, 2010; Garrard & Lipsey, 2007; Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2005; Jones, 2004; Stevahn, 2004).

As Hauver (2017) aptly put it, "the negotiation of value systems is tricky" (p. 11). Analytic frames reflect negotiators' social and cultural locations and what is of value to them. Conflict (even when constructively handled and not escalated) makes visible norms and values that otherwise would be ignored or implicit. Certainly, core value systems, especially in adversarial contexts, can be very difficult to engage respectfully and effectively when they collide, as they inevitably do in our interconnected world. In this sense, Hauver's literature review selected two explicitly cross-cultural international sources: Zhang and colleagues' (2013) study of Chinese and US children's reasoning about a moral dilemma encountered in a piece of literature and Phillips's (2004) discussion of a peacebuilding dialogue encounter between Jewish and Arab students. The former found certain core-value frames to be especially "culturally relevant" to one national group or the other and yet that each group could expand its repertoire of frames through dialogue. The latter illustrated some young people's learning together through encounter dialogue to find common-interest frames—recognition "of how legitimate each other's concerns are"—across barriers of inter-group enmity. Similarly, my own current research team, based on small school-based focus-group conversations in various countries, has uncovered remarkable overlap (and some difference) among young people's (and teachers') values and understandings regarding social conflicts and peace possibilities in widely differing contexts (Bickmore, Awad, & Radjenovic, 2017; Nieto & Bickmore, 2017a, 2017b). One area of unanimity among these youth is their enthusiastic appreciation for, and apparent sense of learning from, such dialogue experiences.

Thus, even across gulfs of difference, space amenable to inclusive, mutually engaged discussion, and even sharing of moral principles can be negotiated, expanded, and practiced in public schools. Although such dialogic practice is not sufficient for either peacebuilding or the reactivation and depolarization of democratic societies, it is one crucial ingredient. To continue learning how to open, facilitate, and understand such peacebuilding citizenship learning opportunities, scholars and educators benefit greatly from careful, systematic listening to children's dialogue, as Hauver (2017) has shown in her paper.

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