

## MEANINGFUL TEACHER CHILD DIALOGUE - RESPONDING TO EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

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### Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increased awareness around the world as to mental health risks to children in crisis situations, the COVID-19 pandemic is one example of this. When examining resilience and vulnerability factors amongst children, significant figures such as teachers, parents and friends' reactions will determine the child's ability to cope. Their reactions can provide open spaces for meaningful communication with children while responding to their needs. This may contribute to their resilience and coping skills (Soejima, 2021, Sprang, & Silman, 2013).

The purpose of this lecture is to describe a discourse program that teachers used in order to provide emotional support during the pandemic, when conducting dialogue with children.

The research method is a discourse analysis of data collected through 30 videos of teachers' conversations with children. The videos were transcribed and then analyzed, using a coding scheme that was developed by the researchers. It was based on a tool designed by Birenbaum et. al., (2004), and adapted to the needs of the study.

The findings showed that as teachers created open spaces and allowed for different perspectives to be heard, the children felt free to speak of their family members, the toys they liked to play with as well as family pets and other interests. The interactions were more symmetrical, meaning that one did not dominate the dialogue, leading to active listening and personal responses. In addition, the findings showed that teachers perceptions and beliefs of their role was that of a pedagogical figure, teaching them and having the children learn. It is important to help teachers develop new role perceptions that consist of providing emotional and social support as well as being a pedagogical figure.

**Keywords:** *Teacher child dialogue, emotional needs, resilience.*

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### 1. Introduction

This study has grown out of the Early Childhood Educational Department at the Kaye Academic College of Education (Beer Sheva, Israel). As mentors and pedagogical advisors to Early Childhood teachers, we have great responsibility in designing an environment that will provide meaningful communication with children. In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of the processes that children go through when dealing with crisis situations and disasters, similar to the crisis of the covid 19 pandemic

### 2. Theoretical background

The global COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives in countless ways. This included, among other things, the transition to online learning in all educational settings as well as other aspects of daily living.

A significant part of the general population and in particular, the children's population showed a high emotional vulnerability to the consequences of the pandemic. Younger children (3-6 years old) showed signs of fear and anxiety about the health status of their family members, while older children (6-18 years old) showed more signs of lack of attention and concentration and often asked their parents repeated questions about the pandemic. In both groups, a higher level of distress was found in geographical areas that were more severely affected by the spread of the virus (Jiao et al., 2020). It was found that when dealing with traumatic experiences related to disaster and emergency situations, social support from the child's

immediate environment, such as: parents and teachers, became especially important (Soejima, 2021; Sprang, & Silman, 2013).

In the college training program, we realized that there needs to be a shift from a teacher's perception that their main role is to teach lesson plans, to a role that would create personal interactions through dialogue where children's voices will be heard. This is known as authentic dialogue (Strickland, & Marinak, 2016).

Authentic dialogues can occur only if the different perspectives given by the children are accepted and not judgmentally rejected. When a teacher withholds the urge to control the child's thinking or reprimand their behavior, they can actively listen and be attentive to the children's needs. Respectful and responsive interactions that respect cultural beliefs and values will strengthen the teacher's relationships with the children and their families (Strickland & Marinak, 2016). Nystrand and his colleagues defined this space as a "positive interaction area" in which many children participate in the dialogues because they feel accepted, they build on each other's ideas and ask questions enthusiastically out of interest (Nystrand et al., 2003).

### 3. Objectives

The purpose of this lecture is to describe a discourse program that teachers used when conducting dialogue with children during the pandemic, in order to provide emotional support.

The research questions are:

1. What are the characteristics of the teachers verbal and non-verbal discourse?
2. What navigation strategies does the teacher use to promote dialogue?
3. What was the contribution of an authentic and emotional dialogue with children as reflected in the words of the children?

### 4. Methods

The research methodology was a discourse analysis i.e., analyzing the use of language while carrying out an act of communication in a given context. The work is grounded in the sociolinguistic approach, emphasizing the functionality of language (Vardi-Rath, Teubal, Aillenberg & Lewin, 2014).

The Participants were 20 Israeli student- teachers in their third and final year of training in a teacher's college as well as 30 Jewish and Arab kindergarten children, ages 3-6 years. Dialogues were conducted between the teachers and the children.

Data was collected through 30 videos taking through Zoom of teacher-child dialogues. Video is a tool that is used to document authentic situations and additionally, to help teachers learn to critically reflect on their classroom interactions (Borko, Jacobs, Eiteljorg, & Pittman, 2008). The videos were transcribed and then analyzed, using a coding scheme that was developed by the researchers. It was based on a tool designed by Birenbaum et. al., (2004), and adapted to the needs of the study. The coding scheme categorizes qualitative analysis teachers' discourse characteristics and the ways they navigated the conversations with the children.

### 5. Findings

Online conversations via Zoom require deep listening from the teachers part as well as providing empathetic responses that meets the child's needs. Due to the young age of the children, there was a need for technical support from family members in the household.

#### 5.1. Example 1: April 2, 2020 – Jewish society

6-year-old girl. Duration of the dialogue: 11 minutes

1. Teacher: Would you like to tell me how you feel on these days, when we're all at home and can't go to the kindergarten? (Followed by several seconds of silence).
2. Girl: Umm... I don't really know.
3. Teacher: What does that mean – "I don't know"?
4. Girl: Umm... It means that I don't know how I feel these days... (Followed by several seconds of silence).
5. teacher: Do you feel happy, or do you feel sad or something else?
6. Girl: Umm... Maybe I feel happy.
7. Teacher: Happy? Are you having fun at home? How are you keeping yourself busy at home? What are you doing that is so much fun?
8. Girl: Umm...I watch TV with my family, play 'Emergency Rescue games ...

This is an example of the teacher shows interest and encourages the girl to talk about her feelings. She opens the dialogue with a question relevant to the situation and time period and is interested in what the girl is going through. At first the girl does not know how to describe her feelings; the teacher does not prompt her and allows her to describe her experience in her own words. The girl explains that she feels "happy" and the teacher supports her by asking her a follow up question that enables her to describe what makes her "happy".

### **5.2. Example 2: May 6, 2020 – Jewish society**

5-year-old girl. Duration of the dialogue: 9 minutes. Context: Political tension leading to missile strikes on Israel from Terrorist groups

8. Girl: [...] I have a cat, Billy; it has a red head and has a white belly.

9. Girl: It has a bed but it sleeps on the couch. You know that a siren went off.

10. Billy got scared and ran away and my father went to look for him but he didn't find him.

11. Teacher: Really? did you find him at the end?

12. Girl: It was an alarm and we were in the bomb shelter and a day after I mean tomorrow Sapir brought Billy.

13. Teacher: Did Billy run away to Sapir's house?

14. Girl: Yes. Billy always goes there; he hides under their steps.

15. Teacher: How cute.

16. Girl: He is afraid of the alarm but I know that the alarm protects us, it is a good thing.

17. Teacher: That's right, my dear, the alarm tells us to go to a safe place and be protected.

This dialogue was conducted with a girl that lives in a small settlement in the Gaza Strip, where many sirens go off, both day and night. The teacher is attentive to the girl and allows her to talk about her experiences at home. It is interesting to see that the prolonged lockdown that the girl experiences remind her of similar experiences that she has from emergency war situations when alarms go off during the war.

The interest and empathy expressed by the teacher is clear. Throughout the dialogue, she listens to the girl, supports her and encourages her to express her feelings and talk about her experiences. That is way the girl could talk about the incident that happened and express herself in a relaxed environment that encouraged her to continue the conversation, helping the teacher get insights as to what she is going through.

### **5.3. Example 3: May 6, 2020 – Arab-Bedouin society**

5-year-old-boy. Duration of the dialogue: 8 minutes. Context: The Muslim holiday of Ramadan, where people fast every day from sunrise to sunset.

17. Teacher: Why did you pick that picture in particular? (Boy showing her a picture through computer screen)

18. Boy: This is a photo taken during the month of Ramadan last year, when we had visitors for dinner. But this year, no one came to visit us because of the Corona (Boy showed a sad face).

19. Teacher: I can certainly relate to your feelings. Like you, I didn't visit anyone and nobody came to a festive supper with us either, so you're not alone. All this will be over soon; never fear.

20. Boy: I also wanted to talk about how we decorate for Ramadan. Can you see the hilal [crescent moon) and the Ramadan star? (Boy smiling).

21. Teacher: Yes, I can see (confirming with her head).

22. Boy: Every night, I help my mother light the Ramadan lights.

23. Teacher: It's lovely to hear that you help your mother (Teacher smiling).

In this dialogue, one can see how the teacher encourages the child to talk about his feelings, his sadness and longing for his extended family that couldn't come because of social distancing. The teacher responds empathetically "I also relate to your feelings" and says that she didn't celebrate with her extended family either. The child shares an experience close to his world related to the custom of hanging decorations and lights as part of the holiday celebrations. He shares how he is waiting to turn on the "Ramadan" lights with the mother.

## **6. Conclusions**

The findings show the main characteristics and strategies that made it possible to promote an optimal and authentic dialogue online between teachers and children. They are:

1. Personal opening statements that arouse excitement and motivation and encourage the children to converse in topics of their own interest.

2. The teacher's ability to suspend control of bringing in their own topic of interest and rather open space for the child to initiate topics, providing a more equal atmosphere.

3. The more reciprocity there is in the dialogue between the participants through listening, genuine consideration and showing interest, the dialogue was more meaningful for the children and promoted a relaxed atmosphere.

The findings show that as teachers created open spaces, allowing for different voices to be heard, the children spoke of their family members, their pets, and other interests. The interactions were more symmetrical, active listening and curious responses were achieved. In cases where closed questions were asked and the teacher's voice was dominant, the children's expressions were limited.

The research offers a unique opportunity for teachers to learn together with children on how to improve their dialogic skills.

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