



Bakhtin for Preschool Teachers



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Abstract

Book Review: White, E. J. (2015). Introducing dialogic pedagogy: Provocations for the early years: Routledge.

I am impressed by the depth of White's understanding of Bakhtin's work and by her innovated uses of Bakhtinian concepts such as answerability, becoming, aesthetics, authorship and polyphony. White's book represents a very important effort to bring these concepts to early childhood education practitioners. In this review I discuss White's ways of making these Bakhtinian concepts accessible to ECE teachers and I provide the necessary context for appreciating the significance of White's contribution.

Keywords

Early childhood education, dialogue, Bakhtinian concepts

Beth Ferholt is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Art Education at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. Her areas of research broadly stated are development, learning and imagination. Her research builds upon the tradition of cultural-historical activity theories. Consistent foci of her research include the methodological project of challenging the divide between method and object in conventional social science; playworlds; the concept of perezhivanie, which is useful in challenging divides between emotion and cognition, and individual and environment; and practices of early childhood education in which children are understood as culture and knowledge creators.



E. Jayne White's *Introducing Dialogic Pedagogy: Provocations for the Early Years* takes on the ambitious task of making theoretically dense and complicated written material accessible to a group of professionals who, in many countries, are not required to have attained a Bachelors degree to pursue their profession.¹ White's book has, for the most part, accomplished this difficult task, and because of this achievement it may become a staple of many early childhood education programs. However, as White points out in her conclusion to the book, the proof of the book's success will be the dialogue it sparks among its intended audience. If a rich dialogue, which shows that preschool teachers find Bakhtin's ideas

¹ Whatever the uses of studying for a Bachelors degree, preparation for, participation in and completion of a Bachelors degree program increases and/or raises the probability of one having various reading competencies.

to be useful as they develop their practice, is generated, then White will have made an extremely important contribution to the field.

White has taken the innovative step of providing [a website for this anticipated dialogue](#)², and also promising her online presence on this website. My guess is that the majority of the teachers and students of early childhood education who read this book will not be intimidated by the material that White's book presents, in part because of the varied modes through which this material is presented. Therefore, I do not expect to see a list of questions for Dr. White, the authority, on this website. Instead, when I join this online discussion in the coming months and years, what I will be looking for is the ways in which the readers of this book are engaging with those of White's arguments that are potentially most disruptive to the status quo in the field. I will be focusing particularly on the posts that engage White's discussion of love in early childhood education, and her innovative use of video cameras and footage.

I am impressed by the depth of White's understanding of Bakhtin's work as well as by her innovated uses of several of Bakhtin's concepts (i.e. answerability, becoming, aesthetics, authorship and polyphony). From the perspective of early childhood education, White's bringing Bakhtin to early childhood teachers in the form of a book falls within a larger effort to create/recreate, or at least define and support, the field of early childhood education. This is a very important effort and I will discuss it briefly and broadly, below, in order to provide the necessary context for appreciating the significance of White's contribution.

The care and education of young children is often treated as an activity that most adults could do well with minimal training. This is in part because early childhood education appears to many people to be closely related to parenting, something that most adults, or at least most women (in many cultures), do, and for which little or no formal academic training is provided. However, any parent who has worked as a preschool teacher understands that while parenting is difficult and the rights of children within their families of origin must be protected, early childhood teaching requires a calling, intense education and ample experience. Being a preschool teacher is as closely related to parenting as being a doctor is to giving someone CPR on the street. In one you develop within an art that includes science, craft and particularly constructed and supported systems of thought and action. In the other you do your best at the time because you are sharing the street with a fellow human being and have found time to learn a few necessary skills.

White has made an important contribution to the work of creating a significant body of literature for early childhood teachers, with this book. All around the world preschool teachers are working in innovative ways, sharing knowledge of the field through practice with other teachers, and reflecting upon and theorizing their work with young children. In only a few nations are preschool teachers given sufficient resources to educate themselves using written texts. The work of creating a rich, diverse, current and relevant body of English language literature for early childhood teachers and teachers in training (one such as exists in Swedish, for instance) goes hand and hand with all of the other aspects of the effort to give early childhood teachers the resources that they need to care for, raise and educate the next generation of human beings: living wages, reasonable benefits, workable hours, environments that are designed by early childhood teachers, sufficient teacher-to-student ratios, sufficient professional development, checks and balances in preschool administration, etc.

White organizes her book into two prongs, first working from dialogic pedagogy and then addressing dialogic pedagogy to early childhood education. She begins with the life of Bakhtin and his

² <https://education.waikato.ac.nz/dialogicpedagogy/>

“overarching theory of dialogism” (p. 12), characterizing his original orientation as being “towards a philosophy of human development” (p. 12). She includes in her initial discussion of Bakhtin’s work introductions to his “informants” and influences, and to what she identifies as the key principles of dialogism: answerability, becoming, aesthetics, authorship and polyphony. White also grounds her readers in Bakhtin’s “five strategies for a dialogic interrogation of language events” (p. 24): utterance, speech genre, chronotope, visual surplus and heteroglossia.

From this first chapter on, White engages her readers by representing the abstract concepts that she presents using video footage on a companion website, and through questions about the footage which she asks of the reader/viewer. This video footage is in a form White calls “polyphonic video,” which is usually “time-synchronized split-screens to convey the multiple visual standpoints of each event” (p. 6). Footage is often collected, in part, using small cameras strapped to adults and children’s foreheads, a method that I have never heard of before being introduced to White’s work and that may prove to be useful for other areas of research in the field. For instance, this method might be useful in the study of environments and materials in the early childhood classroom. There is, of course, the danger that this method could lead people to believe that they are able to “see” from a child or teacher’s point of view.

White next provides an overview of dialogic pedagogy. This includes a list of the principles of dialogic pedagogy. Coming as this does before examples are provided, this list is useful to refer back to as one reads the rest of the book. Dialogic pedagogy in the early years is White’s next focus. Here White questions the role of pedagogy in early childhood education and discusses “loving contemplation” (p. 55, see Sullivan and McCarthy, 2003), “a serious act of lovingly lingering with another” (p. 55). The nuances and exciting prospects of bringing the concept of dialogic pedagogy to the field of early childhood education begin to become apparent in this chapter, and this momentum carries us to what I consider to be the heart of the book, in the next chapter, titled “Teaching with Love.”

In this chapter White writes of Bakhtin’s theory of (aesthetic) love in relation to the idea that when a teacher enters into a relationship, love can be conceptualized as a value. Two extremes are to be avoided in the relationship:

The first, to mould the child into an image of the self ... or a desirable outcome ... ; the second to adopt an impartial stance that professes to have no evaluative opinion If neither extreme is advised, what is the adult to do within intimate relationships that characterize early years pedagogy (even if they are not always acknowledged)? It is here where Bakhtin’s Janus-like attention to language and its meaning takes centre stage – reminding us to recognize and embrace the impact we have on others as creative potential. (pp. 76-77)

Following Bakhtin allows White to challenge the taboo against discussing love within the field of early childhood education, a discussion that, she claims, is fully accepted in disciplines such as religion and philosophy. Although she does not support this claim extensively, I suspect that she is correct.

In her discussion of “teaching with love” White adds an important perspective to the small body of literature discussing love and early childhood education. Neither Noddings (2010) nor work that uses Levinas is sufficient, White explains. Instead, White argues, Bakhtin offers us love as a deed not an emotion and, furthermore, gives us tools with which we can view early childhood teachers in two interrelated ways: as an intimate partner in the life of the child; and as having an evaluative distance from the child “in order to separate one’s own consciousness from theirs” (p. 103). Again, White gives us many examples to illustrate her points, using descriptive text, stills and video.

Next White addresses play. She argues that play is a special kind of *postupok*, a *postupok* being “an action or act that I myself choose to perform and am responsible for” (p. 174). This concept, as it is presented here, does not take us far in understanding play’s specialness within the larger category of *postupok*, although this work is presented in more depth elsewhere in White’s work (Marjanovic-Shane and White, 2014). However, it is wonderful to have Ana Marjanovic-Shane’s (2011) use of the concept of *chronotope* brought to early childhood teachers in this chapter. Marjanovic-Shane (2011) identifies four chronotopes of play: the reality chronotope, the imaginary chronotope, the community of players chronotope, and the audience chronotope. These four chronotopes of play push those of us who think about play to challenge many assumptions that are prevalent in the study of play. White uses the audience chronotope to discuss an audience of teachers versus an audience of peers chronotope.

The final chapters of the book concern laughter and accountability. The first, laughter, White identifies as a special kind of playfulness. She writes of the carnivalesque in the early childhood classroom and the dialogic loophole: “... the retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final, meaning of one’s words” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 233 as quoted by White on p. 143). As for accountability, White writes that it is when addressing this topic that she is most profoundly challenging early childhood teachers who “espouse ‘communities of practice’ and naïve forms of ‘democracy’ based on one cultural standpoint as a sole means of creating harmony at the centre of their pedagogy” (p. 163). It will be very interesting to see on the companion website if teachers agree that this is a significant challenge to their thinking about democracy, which is central to most early childhood education.

White leaves us with a final chapter that brings to the fore the scope of her book’s goal. The book attempts to capture much of Bakhtin’s work and present it coherently, accurately and in less than two hundred pages for people who will likely not read much of the original text. The book attempts to do all this while introducing Bakhtinian concepts to early childhood education, thus challenging the field. White leaves her reader with a concise summary of “dialogic pedagogy in the early years” which includes the following points: “Dialogue *is* learning”; “Teaching is a dialogic imperative”; “Teachers *are* the curriculum”; “Pedagogy is an appreciative process”; “Pedagogy is interactive, responsive and oriented toward other”; “Children are the author of their own learning”; “Meaning is never fixed”; “Learning is a transgradient process”; “Ideology underpins practice”; “Pedagogy can now speak boldly of Love!” (pp. 169-170). However, this book strives for more.

White concludes with the thought that not only are there “no better principles and practices for teachers to acquire than these” (p. 170) (listed above), but also that these are “qualities through which we might live life to its fullest extent” (p. 170). She refers to Bakhtin’s use of the term *Lebensphilosophie*, philosophy of life, in this context. Early childhood teachers are not parenting but they are working daily, in and out of each hour and across a year or years, to co-create new human beings with the children who are being created. The thought that these teachers might benefit from reading about *Lebensphilosophie* as well as about development is long overdue. Preschool teachers do not, after all, talk amongst themselves about how to help the children in their classrooms to develop into adults who are capable of doing X, Y and Z, nearly as frequently as they talk about how to help the small people, whom they have come to love, and who have their whole lives ahead of them, to live life to its fullest. It will be very exciting for all readers of White’s book who concern themselves with such matters in their work to continue their dialogue with *Introducing Dialogic Pedagogy* in the company of the people to whom, considering the nature of their profession, we should be looking for further “provocations” in this area. This book is in many ways an invitation to a dialogue about dialogic pedagogy with and amongst early childhood teachers.

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