

# RESEARCH BRIEF

## Patterns of dialogic teaching in kindergarten classrooms

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A collaboration of researchers from the UAE (New York University Abu Dhabi and Zayed University Abu Dhabi) and Finland (University of Jyväskylä)



This study explored patterns of dialogic teaching in kindergarten classrooms in Finland and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), two countries with different educational systems and cultural backgrounds. Evidence was found that educational classroom dialogue is rare but occurs in the kindergarten classrooms in both countries. However, the nature and quality of dialogue was found to vary between Finland and the UAE.

- Quality of social interactions are vital to the process of learning. It is through dialogue that teachers engage students in whole-class discussion, thus providing them with opportunities to practice asking questions, reason, evaluate and take their own initiatives.
- Dialogic teaching is described as classroom discussions in which both teacher and students play an active role in shared knowledge building and in which the teacher scaffolds students' participation and understanding.

### The study

Socio-cultural factors shape social interactions. It is thus possible that classroom talk might not follow the same pattern across all countries. In this study, we explored patterns of dialogic teaching in kindergarten classrooms in Finland and the UAE. Due to key differences in the countries' education systems and culture, teaching practices and strategies might differ.

- *Early childhood education programs in Finland* emphasize play with a focus equity in learning opportunities.
- *Early childhood education programs in the UAE* have a strong academic focus and aim to integrate approaches to learning and academic performance.

**Participants** were teachers and children in kindergarten classrooms in Finland and the UAE. 13 classrooms per country were selected based on the amount and high quality of interactions between the teacher and children in a 20-minute learning session recorded using mobile eye-tracking glasses. The learning session was transcribed and analyzed focusing on identifying patterns of dialogic teaching.



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### What is dialogic teaching?

**Collective:** teacher and children address learning tasks together, as a small group or in the whole class.

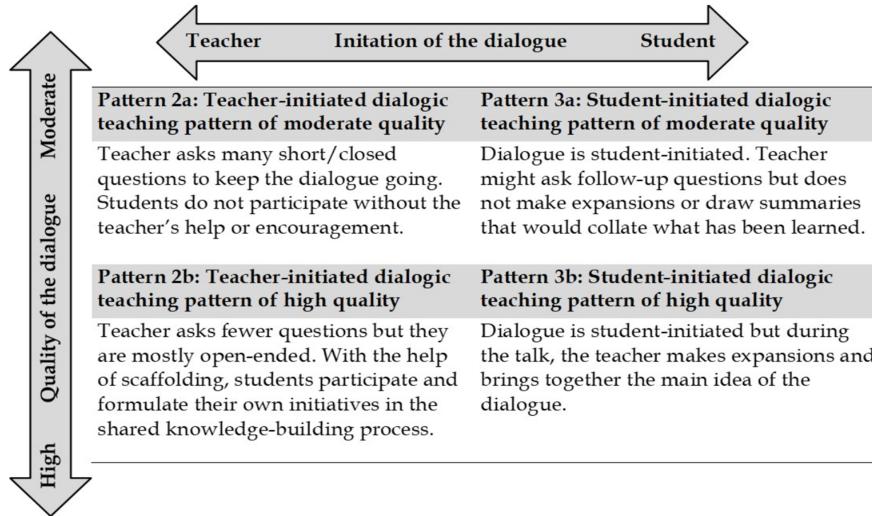
**Reciprocal:** teacher and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints.

**Supportive:** children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment about giving a wrong answer and they help each other to reach a common understanding of a concept.

**Cumulative:** teachers and children build on their own and each others' ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry.

**Purposeful:** teachers plan and steer classroom talk with specific educational goals in mind.

## Findings



**Figure. Patterns of dialogic teaching**

(Muohonen, Rasku-Puttonen, Pakarinen, Poikkeus, & Lerkkanen, 2016)

- Teacher-initiated educational dialogue of high quality (pattern 2b) was the dominant dialogic teaching pattern.
- However, shorter interactions, that is: question-response-feedback, occurred more often than dialogic teaching patterns.
- In the Finnish sample, more episodes of educational dialogue were found compared to the UAE sample.

Patterns of dialogic teaching	Finland Number of episodes	UAE Number of episodes
Pattern 2a: Teacher-initiated teaching dialogue of moderate quality	14	8
Pattern 2b: Teacher-initiated teaching dialogue of high quality	21	14
Pattern 3a: Student-initiated teaching dialogue of moderate quality	4	1
Pattern 3b: Student-initiated teaching dialogue of high quality	3	1
Episodes in total	42	24

### Finland

- Teachers used **open-ended questions** that required **student elaboration** to spark a dialogue.
- Children's comments were typically followed by teachers' comments, with some follow-up questions.
- Teachers' scaffolding was mostly characterized by **reflective statements** and occasional elaboration of student comments.
- There was a good amount of discussion in response to teacher-initiated prompts, and teachers were **sensitive** to children's initiatives during the dialogue.

### UAE

- Dialogues were dominated by the teacher, who typically invited students to engage in discussions by asking a **series of questions**.
- Both **open and close-ended questioning** were used as primary means for scaffolding discussions.
- Teachers acknowledged students' responses, often by providing feedback regarding the **accuracy of their response**.
- Teachers were **looking for a specific answer** rather than multiple hypotheses, predictions, or explanations of the child's thinking.



## Implications

In both countries, the amount of educational dialogue was very limited and classroom interactions were dominated by short exchanges between the teacher and children instead of more extended discussion. Findings also showed variations in the amount of educational dialogue and type of teacher scaffolding between Finnish and UAE kindergarten classrooms. Differences in classroom interactions between countries, and even between schools within countries, should not only be seen to represent contrasting teaching methods but also contrasting conceptions of pedagogy. Implementing teacher training programs to increase educational dialogue that complement the culture and pedagogy is encouraged. This is especially important in increasing child-initiated dialogues

that were rare in both countries. The skills for dialogue and shared knowledge building can have a positive impact on students' lifelong learning. Pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development should include training in the diverse strategies of how to scaffold children's participation and learning through dialogic teaching.

## Recommendations for improving the amount and quality of educational dialogue

- It is important to raise the amount and quality of educational dialogue in kindergarten classrooms in order to support children's learning and communication skills.
- The role of educational dialogue for children's learning should be acknowledged at the curricular level in each country's educational system. Attention should be paid to teachers' dialogue and scaffolding skills in teacher education and continue during in-service training.
- Teachers and student teachers need concrete tools to use and examples of how to support both teacher- and student-initiated dialogues in order to foster students' participation, engagement in argumentation and shared understanding.

## Strategies for scaffolding and encouraging children's participation to educational dialogue

- Use interesting and inquiry-stimulating vocabulary to awake and maintain children's interest.
- Use authentic open-ended questions that allow children to tell about their personal experiences.
- Indicate that there might not be just one correct answer, and that children are allowed to express their opinions and to explain them. Use words such as 'perhaps' and 'might' as an invitation to a range of possible actions.
- Prompt children's comments by using phrases or comments that show that you are listening and are interested.
- Repeat good questions or remarks made by a child for the whole class to reflect on.

## Strategies for scaffolding educational dialogue and shared knowledge-building

- Listen actively for students' initiation of dialogue.
- Ask questions that allow elaboration and diverse views. Ask follow-up questions to expand the knowledge being shared or to guide the direction of the discussion.
- Link students' ideas and experiences into bigger learning goals and concepts (such as moral rules or societal knowledge).
- Expand on children's comments and summarize the knowledge that has been accumulated.
- Accept responses without evaluating them too strongly.