Argumentation in preschool: finding a common ground for collaborative learning

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Abstract

Assuming a sociocultural perspective, the paper analyze how argumentation in preschool contributes to create a dialogic social practice aimed to develop children’s socialization through the process of arguing conflicting or alternative points of views. We identify two main tracks of inquiry, respectively devoted to investigate children-teacher talk (CT) and peer talk (PT) in early childhood. CT and PT generally coexist within the same educational setting, but historically they have originated two separated research traditions. Consequently, the relationship between formal and informal talk as a mean for learning in preschool remains relatively unexplored. To fill this gap we chose to analyze the way teachers and children use different kinds of argumentation through CT and PT in kindergarten. Adopting an ethnographic approach, the study aims to show how CT and PT could integrate and contribute to create a “common ground” for collaborative learning in preschool.

Research aims

In the last few years, talking as a mean of argumentation in preschool has been the subject of several studies (Corsaro, 1994; Goodwin, Kyritzis, 2007; Kyritzis, 2004). We can identify two main tracks of inquiry, respectively devoted to investigate children-teacher talk and peer talk in early childhood (Erlich, 2010). Children-teacher talk (CT) in the classroom is primarily related to the management of planned activities (drawing, telling stories…), which are structured by teachers in terms of educational goals. CT requires specific teachers’ abilities in building learning environments
enabling everyday conversation as a pillar for collaboration on knowledge construction from an early age (Hasan, 2002).

Conversely, peer talk (PT) mainly happens during non-structured activities, when children are allowed to play freely and talk occurs “on the spot”, following the children’s need to frame the conversation. PT involves two discursive planes. The first plane highlights the socio-anthropological dimensions of children talk, as a way for negotiating meaning and relationships embedded in peer culture (Rogoff, 1990). The second plane, focused on the developmental dimensions, considers PT as a key strategy for improving pragmatic competencies during the growth process (Valsiner, 2008).

Though CT and PT coexist within the same educational setting, historically they originated two separated research traditions (Blum-Kulka, Snow, 2004). Therefore, the relationship between formal and informal talk as a mean for learning in preschool remains relatively unexplored. To fill this gap we chose to analyze the way teachers and children use different kinds of argumentation through CT and PT in kindergarten. For this purpose, we adopted a sociocultural perspective, which sees argumentation as a dialogic social practice aimed to develop children’s socialization through the process of arguing alternative points of views (Pontecorvo, 1993; Grimshaw, 1990). Alternating structured activities and free play, kindergartens offer an ideal setting to study the way the teachers prompt children to discuss about a shared subject through everyday conversations, and the way children deal with the same issue on a peer basis. The research is aimed:

- to know how effective are teachers in using argumentation as a conversational pattern directed to promote children learning;
- to analyze what kind of discursive strategies children use in constructing arguments as a mean to negotiate social relationships through the peer talk;
- to understand how CT and PT could integrate and contribute to create a “common ground” for collaborative learning in preschool.

Methodology

The study has ben carried out in a small-town kindergarten consisting of three classes.
Each class was comprised of 20 children from three to five years, with one teacher and one assistant teacher. The data collection process was based on ethnographic fieldwork, which included video-recordings, observations, and extensive field notes. In each class, we collected PT by inviting children to freely draw on a stimulating subject (“the bogeyman”) and recording their comments during the activity, as the adults silently observed. Afterwards, we collected CT in each class during conversation sessions organized by teachers, which involved children to talk about the same subject starting from their drawings. All verbal exchanges were fully transcribed and examined using conversation analysis to produce quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative analysis was focused on assessing the exchanges amount and the turn-taking process developed during PT and CT. Qualitative analysis was aimed to identify agreement and disagreement phases in children argumentation during PT, and to verify the teachers’ ability to support and expand the active participation of children during CT. Finally we compared quantitative and qualitative dimensions in PT and CT looking for shared elements able to define a “common ground” for collaborative learning.

Findings and theoretical and educational significance of the research

Our study shows that children in preschool are generally able to use argumentative PT supporting their viewpoints in a logical way, which includes the negotiation of disagreements through flexible and well-articulated strategies. Conversely, CT analysis reveals that teachers often use closed questions as a favorite argumentation style in everyday conversations. Therefore, the richness of argumentation strategies continuously arising from PT remains mostly unused, as CT frequently lacks the ability to transform it in a structured opportunity for enhancing learning through dialogue and cooperation. The research provides some final suggestions about how preschool teachers can improve their skills in managing everyday conversation with children as a common ground for the construction of collaborative learning environments.
 References


