



Breaking out of the grips of dichotomous discourse in teacher post-observation debrief conversations



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Dichotomous discourse plagues educational thinking and discussion.
- Three ways of coping with dichotomies are discussed.
- Teachers coped with dichotomous discourse in video-based feedback conversations.
- Factors contributing to non-dichotomous discourse are identified.

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ABSTRACT

Educational discourse is dominated by problematic dichotomies, for example, between teacher- and learner-centred pedagogies, and between teacher control and pupil autonomy. Such dichotomies impede attempts to understand and address complex educational problems, and thwart productive discussion among practitioners and the public. This article examines how teachers in one Israeli school addressed dichotomous discourse around classroom management in video-based post-observation debrief conversations. Three ways of coping with dichotomies are conceptualized: *either/or*, *synthesis* and *both/and*. Factors contributing to the emergence of non-dichotomous discourse are discussed, including ambivalent leadership, the use of video representations, flattened hierarchies, and a focus on issues and dilemmas.

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In a break from the organizational structures conventional in Israeli schools, the teachers at Amichai Primary School regularly watch one another teach and subsequently discuss what they have observed and experienced in “dialogic debrief” conversations. These conversations unearthed intense pedagogical controversy among the staff at Amichai Primary School. In this article we investigate how the teachers and principal talked through their differences, and use this case study to explore the dynamics and possible ways of responding to dichotomous discourse in education. By way of introduction, we invite the reader into one of the first of 21 encounters that took place at the school in the programme’s first year.

Our account begins in a remarkably orderly 2nd grade classroom. The teacher, Noa, circulates among her pupils, stopping to

comment on their work. Bar, the school art teacher, and a researcher sit off to the side and take notes. The researcher also video-records the lesson. Noa stops by a pair of children and admires one pupil’s notebook. “Wow,” she says, “What order you have in your notebook! What an orderly notebook! Such clear writing.” She turns to the child sitting next to the owner of the orderly notebook: “Are you paying attention? I must, no I must, show you Saar’s notebook. Do you notice something special here? Do you see? Clear writing, spacing, simply stunning. Do you know why I seated you near Saar? So you can see his notebook ...”

Bar shakes her head and mutters, “Bad, really bad what she’s doing.” She looks up from her notes at the researcher, to gauge her reaction. “That’s wrong, not the way to do it,” Bar continues.

After the lesson Noa and Bar confer briefly about what to focus on in the debrief conversation, so that the researcher can edit the video accordingly. Both wish to discuss the use of reinforcements, but from opposite perspectives. Bar confides in the researcher that she found Noa’s reinforcement of Saar’s behavior to be humiliating

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to the child to whom she favorably compared him. Noa, on the other hand, is interested in how reinforcement of pupils' positive behavior motivates them to learn.

A week later, at the debrief conversation, Noa and Bar watched together the video-recording of the event involving Saar's notebook. Noa notes with satisfaction how much better behaved her class are now compared to when she first started working with them. Bar stops the video and asks that they watch the event again, explaining: "emotionally, this was difficult for me. I felt that one child was being encouraged at another child's expense." Noa is taken aback, and explains that her only intention was for the boys to learn from one another.

Underlying the differences in the teachers' interpretations of this event are fundamental differences in their educational philosophies. Noa is an adherent of the "Applied Behavior Analysis" approach to classroom management, which uses frequent teacher praise to positively reinforce desired pupil behaviors. Bar prefers a progressive approach, according to which pupil motivation grows out of intrinsic interest in lesson content and tasks. While Noa emphasizes discipline as a precondition for learning, Bar emphasizes choice. Noa sees order in the video-recorded lesson; Bar sees oppression.

The differences between Noa and Bar are echoed in debates among the entire staff at the school, and indeed have riven educators working in mass education systems for over a century. John Dewey viewed this and related divisions as central to United States educational problems at the beginning of the 20th century: "We get the case of the child vs. the curriculum; of the individual nature vs. social culture. Below all other divisions in pedagogic opinion lies this opposition" (Dewey, 1902, p. 5). Dewey argued that these oppositions reflect a false dichotomy, which requires a "travail of thought" to transcend. Dewey's century-old analysis still rings true as an assessment of current educational discourse in the U.S. (Higgins & Burbules, 2011), England (Alexander, 2008) and Israel (Pollak, Segal, & Lefstein, 2015).

This article examines how teachers at Amichai Primary School addressed this dichotomy in their discussions of classroom management and pupil motivation in post-lesson debrief conversations. We conceptualize three approaches to dichotomous discourse – *either/or*, *synthesis* and *both/and* – and investigate how they played out in the teachers' conversations. We conclude with a discussion of the particular constellation of factors that facilitated breaks from the grips of dichotomous discourse. A number of researchers have recently drawn attention to the importance of teacher conversations for their on-the-job learning (e.g. Horn & Little, 2010; Little, 2002); we seek to contribute to this scholarship by highlighting the relatively unexplored issue of dichotomous discourse and by offering a theoretical frame for understanding and addressing it.

1. Dichotomous thinking and discourse

A popular cognitive and rhetorical strategy involves dividing phenomena or positions into mutually exclusive, binary pairs and arguing for the superiority of one side. Indeed, this tendency toward dichotomous thinking and discourse is so deeply ingrained in our culture – consider, for example, the divisions mind-body, reason-emotion, theory-practice, male-female – that some scholars have argued that it resonates with the very structure of the human mind (e.g. Wood & Petriglieri, 2005). Dichotomous thinking has its advantages, including analytic clarity, cognitive convenience, and rhetorical force, but also serious shortcomings, especially when applied to complex social problems.

Among the "defining features" of dichotomous thinking identified by Prokhovnik (2001) are "an opposition between two identities, a hierarchical ordering of the pair [and] the idea that between them this pair sum up and define a whole" (p. 23). The opposition

between two identities in dichotomous thinking implies mutual exclusion: the mind is entirely separate from the body, reason is a cognitive process devoid of emotion, and – continuing the example with which we opened the paper – external control of pupil activity necessarily impinges upon their intrinsic motivation. However, as Scott (1988) argues, "Fixed oppositions conceal the extent to which things presented as oppositional are, in fact, interdependent" (p. 37; see also Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 100–102). So, for example, in the case of external control vs. intrinsic motivation, the dichotomy conceals the extent to which the autonomous self is constructed in interaction with, and even in resistance to, adult supervision.

Dichotomous thinking involves not just setting two ideas in opposition, but also constructing a hierarchy in which one side of the opposition is superior to the other. For example, the first terms in the pairs noted above – i.e. mind, reason, theory and male – have typically been cast as the dominant, preferred term in Western thought (Lloyd, 1984). Likewise, within education, the pedagogical world is commonly divided into progressive vs. traditional, learner-centred vs. teacher-centred, intrinsic motivation vs. external control, and (thinking-rich) knowledge construction vs. (unthinking) knowledge transmission (see Alexander, 2008; on dichotomous pedagogic discourse). In almost all such divisions, progressive, learner-centred, intrinsically-motivated, knowledge-constructing education is posited as the desired direction of change. In with the new and out with the old.

The third feature of dichotomous thinking is that the two opposites are seen to be jointly exhaustive of the field, i.e. they leave no space for a third (or more) possibilities. So, for example, the dichotomy "either teacher control or pupil freedom" obscures the possibility (advanced by Dewey, 1938) of sharing social control among all members of the classroom community.

In addition to these cognitive features – the division into mutually exclusive binary opposites, hierarchical ordering and the exclusion of other ideas – dichotomous discourse also has social and cultural dimensions. First, dichotomous discourse polarizes not only ideas but also people: "you're either with us or against us" is corollary to the binary "x or not x". Second, the zero-sum logic of dichotomies – i.e. if one side is right then the other is wrong – tends to give rise to an adversarial style of argumentation (Prokhovnik, 2001, pp. 33–36) or what Tannen (1998) calls "argument culture", in which "lust for opposition privileges extreme views and obscures complexity; ... eagerness to find weaknesses blinds us to strengths; [and] ... the atmosphere of animosity precludes respect and poisons our relations with one another" (Tannen, 1998, p. 25).

Tannen attributes the rise of argument culture to, among other factors, mass media preference for drama. Similarly, Alexander (2008) argues that the division of "educational ideas and practices into the warring camps of 'traditional' and 'progressive' appeals not just to lazy minds but also to more alert calculations about how the world is best represented for the purposes of selling newspapers and winning elections" (p. 73).

Given its prevalence, the important question is not whether the disadvantages of dichotomous discourse outweigh its benefits, but rather how should we address the dichotomies in which we find ourselves already caught up? In this paper we analyze and discuss three strategies: *either/or*, *synthesis* and *both/and*. The *either/or* strategy involves accepting the dichotomous division, and arguing for the superiority of one of the two sides. This strategy and its shortcomings have been the focus of our discussion up to this point.

The *synthesis* strategy involves developing a compromise that integrates aspects of the two opposing ideas, or a third term that transcends them. So, for example, rather than viewing freedom and rules as mutually exclusive, we might recognize that in contemporary social life absolute freedom from constraints would be disastrous; the social order that constrains is also a critical source of

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