

Slide 3 — The democratic promise of dialogue

Let me start from the general premise of the conference, which is that dialogue plays a central role in democratic education.

Following contemporary conceptualizations, by dialogue I do not mean talk, or conversation in a loose sense. In everyday conversation we typically seek to preserve some kind of stability or peace: we might exchange views, but we also might be more interested in sharing a pleasant moment with someone than we are in changing anyone's mind. Dialogue, at least in the sense I am interested in here, has a more destabilizing function. It is exploratory and cooperative, but it also introduces what Lipman calls a productive disequilibrium. It brings students into contact with otherness, with perspectives that challenge the way they already see the world.

That is why dialogue is so important for democratic education. Democratic life requires people who can hear views that challenge their existing frames, who can remain in cooperative inquiry despite disagreement, and who can sometimes revise themselves in light of what others say.

This connects to democratic citizenship in several ways. If we think of democratic citizens as responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented, then all three dimensions require some form of dialogical openness. Responsibility involves noticing others' needs and the effects of our actions on them. Participation involves working with others to solve shared problems. And a justice orientation requires attention to the ways norms, institutions, and habits affect people whose experience may be very different from our own.

So dialogue matters because it can help students encounter perspectives that shake up their current assumptions. It can contribute to what Katariina Holma calls *fallibilist pluralism*: a moral-epistemological posture, anchored as a habit of thought, toward revising one's representations in light of contact with other points of view.

Through this openness, dialogue can also support deeper forms of subjective renewal or self-transformation through the appropriation of otherness, which are key features of a living, dynamic democratic populace.

So dialogue is essential for many parts of democratic life, understood in the broad Deweyan sense. But, at the same time, its promise can be fragile. Exposure to other views is not always enough, either to help students understand other people's perspectives and experiences in the moment, or to create an ideally lasting disposition of humble epistemic openness.

Slide 4 — Barriers to dialogical success

To understand how a school's relational climate can support dialogical success, I first want to clarify what can prevent dialogue from doing what it promises to do.

Dialogue may indeed cultivate fallibilist habits of thought, but I would argue that this cannot begin from nowhere. To enter the kind of dialogue that forms such a disposition, students already need a minimal form of openness: not a fully developed democratic virtue, but a readiness to be affected by another perspective.

This is pre-dialogical in the sense that it conditions whether dialogue can get started as dialogue, instead of flattening into ordinary conversation, strategic performance, or defensive exchange. And this openness is difficult, because while exploring other perspectives can be exciting or interesting, it can also destabilize one's self-understanding and expose one to judgment. But without it, we can transform neither our current perspective nor our mental habits.

I group the obstacles to this transformation into three broad families: semantic, emotional, and institutional barriers. Semantic barriers block openness at the level of meaning uptake; emotional barriers make openness costly by turning dialogical exposure into a threat to identity, status, or belonging; and institutional barriers neutralize openness by containing it within isolated activities or turning it into performance.

The first set of barriers comes from social psychologist Alex Gillespie, who explores the semantic mechanisms that can prevent dialogical contact from being transformative. The basic idea is that existing representations tend to protect themselves against meanings that could destabilize them. So when this happens, you might let someone else's words into your mind, but you concoct a way to neutralize their force before they can unsettle your existing frame.

Gillespie identifies several ways this can happen. First, there is avoidance: the perspective is marked as not worth engaging with. For example: "That is just what privileged people say." Second, there is delegitimization: the speaker is dismissed as ignorant, biased, naïve, extremist, or badly motivated. For example: "Of course he thinks that; he's a democrat / a Mormon / a truck driver / what have you." Third, there is quarantine: the point is acknowledged, but treated as irrelevant to one's own framework. For example: "Maybe that's true in their case, but it has nothing to do with our situation."

So through these semantic barriers the perspective is not necessarily ignored. Sometimes it is heard, but processed in a way that prevents it from mattering. Otherness is absorbed into the existing frame without transforming it.

The second family of barriers is emotional. So while semantic barriers concern how meanings are processed once they are heard, emotional barriers concern whether students can let themselves become vulnerable enough either for those meanings to reach them in the first place, or to express what they actually believe.

Dialogue asks students to do something emotionally risky. It asks them to expose what they really think, admit uncertainty, let another person's view unsettle their own, and perhaps

revise without losing face. This is especially difficult when the topic touches identity: political identity, moral self-image, social status in the group, or belonging among peers.

For example, a student may give a safe, generic answer because they are afraid their real view will be mocked. Another student may immediately joke, deflect, or become aggressive when disagreement feels too personally threatening. Or a student may refuse to revise publicly because changing one's mind would feel like humiliation rather than inquiry.

In terms of listening, emotional distress obviously hijacks whatever mental presence could be allocated to others' words. If you feel emotionally fragile or unsafe in a given context, your attentional posture is going to be one of defending against perceived threats – not welcoming otherness.

This is especially intense in adolescence, because identity is already unstable and socially exposed. Students are negotiating who they are, how they are seen, and where they belong. So dialogue can feel less like an intellectual exchange and more like a threat to the self. The result is defensive closure: silence, irony, overconfidence, performance, or retreat into familiar group positions.

The third family of barriers is institutional. In the paper, I focus on two institutional barriers, drawing especially from a recent paper by Laura D'Olimpio.

The first is the transfer problem. If dialogue happens only in a specific class, module, or isolated activity, the posture it calls for may not carry over. Students may learn how to “do dialogue” in that space without becoming more dialogically open elsewhere.

The second is the performance problem. Once dialogue is graded, students may orient themselves primarily toward **demonstrating** the skill under evaluation. The point then becomes **appearing** open, reasonable, transformed, or reflective. Students may prefer to *perform understanding* rather than *risk learning* – because for them the point of the activity is to get a good grade.

So in both cases, something about the school's structure can neutralize dialogue: either by containing it too narrowly, or by turning it into another evaluative performance.

This is one way of stating the problem of dialogue. I do think pedagogical technique and protocol can address some of these hurdles – and I'll have one more word to say about that later. But I also think there is a deeper issue: whether the relational conditions of the classroom make subjective openness livable (semantically or emotionally), and whether they make this kind of posture make sense in the first place, given the institutional setting.

Slide 5 — Relational qualities as dialogical conditions

So this brings me to relational qualities as dialogical conditions.

We often hear that trust is essential for dialogue, and I agree with that. But trust is not something teachers can simply demand or directly produce. Trust is an attitude that emerges from a relational context, from a history of interactions in a given environment.

So the actionable question is not simply: how do we make students trust one another? For me, the question is: what kind of relational context makes trust more likely?

This is why I focus on relational qualities. By relational qualities, I mean characteristics of pedagogical relationships. These are enacted through interaction, but they are not reducible to individual behavior, private feelings, or isolated techniques. They are properties of the relationship itself, or of the relational atmosphere: emergent features of a complex web of human connections.

This is important because while the teacher has a privileged role in shaping the atmosphere of the classroom, he or she does not have total control over it. There are wider institutional, social, and parental factors that condition the pedagogical relationship, and I'll have a few words to say about these at the end of the talk.

But I want to be clear from the outset that I am not talking simply about qualities of teacher behavior. I am trying to describe qualities of the relationship itself, and more broadly of the classroom atmosphere.

Of course, many people here will be familiar with broader relational ideals that have been brought into educational philosophy: care, recognition, resonance, and others. I do think these ideals are useful for informing teacher judgment. But they can also be a little too package-like. The problem is that education is deeply contextual, and I don't think there is any one-size-fits-all pedagogical relational ideal that can simply be applied everywhere. On top of this, ideals in relational pedagogy tend to undertheorize healthy, legitimate authority.

So instead of defending one complete ideal of the good pedagogical relationship, I want to identify three centrally important relational qualities that can be balanced differently across situations: affection, authority, and attentiveness.

In the next part of the talk, I want to explain why these three qualities matter by relating them back to the barriers I just described. The point is not that each quality solves one barrier. Rather, each quality bears on all three barriers, and together they help create the kind of context in which dialogue can become transformative.

Slide 6 – Affection

The first relational quality is affection, which I understand as a relational climate of mutual appreciation and warmth. I do not mean that the teacher simply has to “be nice,” or that everyone has to like everyone in some deep personal sense. Affection is not just a private feeling. It is a quality of the pedagogical relationship, and more broadly of the classroom atmosphere.

Some authors, including Maija Lanås here in Oulu, go further and talk about the importance of love in education. I absolutely understand the appeal of that language, but for my purposes I think we can get a good part of what we need from the perhaps less frightening concept of affection.

Affection responds perhaps most directly to emotional barriers, because it lowers the subjective cost of being unsettled. If I feel appreciated, if I feel that others do not want to humiliate me, then I can risk saying something that is actually mine. I can risk self-disclosure. And without self-disclosure, there is no real contact with otherness. There is only contact with what someone thinks they are supposed to say.

So affection helps because it reduces the need for defensive self-protection. If I feel safe enough, I do not have to spend all of my energy protecting my identity, my status in the group, or my relationship with myself. On the one hand, this makes it easier for me to express my perspective more authentically, because I am not constantly afraid that some core part of myself will be attacked. On the other hand, it also frees my attention for curiosity, listening, and revision. I can become available to what others are saying because I am less absorbed in defending myself.

Affection also matters for semantic barriers. If I feel no connection to the person speaking, or if I experience them immediately as a threat, then it is very easy to process their words through ready-made categories: “That is just what people like them say,” or “That has nothing to do with me.” But when the relationship is marked by some degree of warmth or mutual appreciation, this tendency is softened. The other person is less easily reduced to a type. Their words are less easily quarantined as foreign material. Affection does not eliminate disagreement, of course, but it makes charitable interpretation more likely because the other person is not immediately pigeonholed as an enemy or a representative of a hostile group.

Finally, affection also has some bearing on institutional barriers. In relation to the transfer problem, the feelings of belonging that we experience in affectionate settings can help the dialogical habits that we develop there travel beyond the isolated activity. If dialogue is experienced as part of a meaningful relationship with people who matter to me, then the posture it calls for is less likely to remain trapped in one class or one exercise. It is more likely to become part of how I relate to others more generally. And in relation to the performance problem, I think that, to a certain extent, affection can shift the perceived point of the activity. I might still want to get the good grade, but I may also notice a valuable opportunity to be understood by people whose recognition matters to me.

That said, affection alone cannot secure dialogue. Warmth without norms may collapse when disagreement intensifies. If people like one another but there is no stable framework for handling conflict, then difficult dialogue can still become unsafe very quickly. This is why the second quality is authority.

Slide 7 – Authority

Regarding authority, relational pedagogy often hesitates around the issue of power. And that is of course understandable, because there are very good reasons to be suspicious of authoritarian teacher conduct. But the alternative to authoritarianism cannot be the absence of authority. Dialogue needs authority if it is going to remain open when disagreement becomes difficult.

So I define authority as a legitimate and bounded asymmetry of power in the pedagogical relationship, that is understood and recognized by those involved. In simpler terms, it is the shared understanding that the teacher has standing to structure interaction, protect the learning space, and uphold the norms required for a classroom to function.

So, on the one hand, authoritarianism is arbitrary, monopolar, and closed to revision – it is fundamentally antialogical. Legitimate pedagogical authority, on the other hand, protects the conditions under which dialogue can remain open.

This matters first for semantic barriers. Many semantic barriers can be weakened through pedagogical protocols: asking for clarification before contestation, requiring public reasons, encouraging charitable interpretation, or making sure that less powerful voices are not distorted or dismissed. But these protocols only work if they have force. **Authority is the relational quality that gives technique its teeth.** If a teacher cannot reliably secure adherence to the norms of dialogue, even the best protocol will remain fragile. Authority allows the teacher to interrupt motive-dumping, caricature, or immediate dismissal, and to hold the group to a mode of interaction in which meanings can actually be considered.

Authority also matters for emotional barriers. Dialogue involves conflict, and some degree of conflict is part of its educational value. But conflict obviously needs to be contained if it is to remain agonistic rather than antagonistic. Predictable authority helps hold the space when disagreement intensifies. It can prevent ridicule, escalation, domination, or the kind of group dynamic where a student learns that it is dangerous to speak honestly. It can also normalize revision. If the teacher's authority frames changing one's mind as an ordinary move in inquiry, then revision does not have to feel like humiliation or defeat.

Perhaps to a lesser extent, authority may also affect institutional barriers, especially the performance problem. When dialogue becomes an evaluated activity, students may focus on displaying the signs of deliberative competence: sounding open, reasonable, reflective, or transformed. Legitimate authority can help resist this by clarifying and upholding the norms of the activity itself. The teacher can make it clear that good participation does not mean performing openness, but engaging seriously with others' meanings: asking, listening, revising, and giving reasons. More indirectly, when these norms are upheld as part of the ordinary life of the classroom, rather than as rules for a one-off exercise, authority can help make them feel less artificial.

So authority can, to a certain extent, set the terms of uptake. It can protect the dialogical space and uphold the norms that make inquiry possible. But authority cannot, by itself, guarantee that meanings are received carefully. For that, we need attentiveness.

Slide 8 – Attentiveness

I define attentiveness as a mode of uptake in which participants' words, actions, and standpoints are received with careful, charitable, and sustained consideration. In simpler terms, it is a relational mode in which meanings are held long enough to be understood before they are categorized, judged, or neutralized.

This is especially important because dialogue often fails when we react too quickly. Someone says something, and almost immediately we know what kind of person they are, what group they belong to, what hidden motive explains their claim, and why we do not need to be affected by it. Attentiveness slows down the instinctive movement from hearing to categorizing.

For this reason, attentiveness responds very directly to semantic barriers. It disrupts the rush to slot claims into ready-made frames. It holds meanings in view long enough for them to be worked through, rather than neutralized by caricature, stigma, or what have you. In a sense, attentiveness lets otherness remain strange for a moment. And that moment matters. If the other person's words are immediately translated into something I already know how to dismiss, then no transformation is possible. But if their meaning is held open, even briefly, then it can begin to unsettle the frame through which I was listening.

Attentiveness also matters for emotional barriers. When I feel like *I* am accurately heard, I might not necessarily feel agreed with, but I do feel recognized. That lowers defensiveness. It doesn't make me invulnerable, but it makes the vulnerability *that is required for dialogue* more livable because what I say is received, and not merely exposed. In the same way, careful uptake can reduce the emotional escalation that can be caused by feelings of misrecognition. Sometimes conflict intensifies not because disagreement is too deep, but because one person feels that their meaning has been distorted. And in this sense, attentiveness does not eliminate conflict, nor should it. Dialogue needs friction. But it can reduce the subjective cost of that friction, so that disagreement does not immediately become a threat to the self.

Finally, attentiveness also bears on the institutional barriers. In relation to the transfer problem, what is carefully attended to is more likely to travel. A moment in which someone really felt heard, or really had to hear another person carefully, that's more memorable than a formal exercise in turn-taking. Attentive dialogical moments can become portable. They can become examples, templates, or memories that students carry into other contexts.

And in relation to the performance problem, attentiveness gives sincere expression an immediate value. If students experience that they are actually being listened to, then there is a reason to say what they think beyond simply performing openness for a grade. The value

of being understood may counterbalance, to a certain extent, the pressure to merely display the right deliberative behavior.

Very briefly before moving to the conclusion – I think these three relational qualities also reinforce one another mutually. In two words: affection frees attention from self-protection. Authority gives attention time and structure. And attentiveness strengthens both affection and authority, because being heard accurately often produces the feeling of “you got me right.” That experience can deepen feelings of connection and appreciation, make norms feel fairer, and make disagreement easier to inhabit.

The core thesis of my paper is that together, these three relational qualities create a pedagogical climate in which subjective openness becomes more livable — a climate in which students can risk being affected by others without immediately retreating into defense, performance, or dismissal. And this openness, I believe, is crucial for authentic dialogue to emerge in the first place — and even more so, for it to foster lasting democratic dispositions.

Slide 9 – Institutional Implications

In this paper, I don’t go too deep into the institutional conditions of relational quality. I have addressed this elsewhere, and I am currently finishing a book that focuses quite a bit on this. But I do want to underline one point: while teachers obviously play a central front-line role in fostering pedagogical relational quality, they are not fully responsible for it. Institutions play a central role in shaping the conditions under which such relationships become possible.

Institutions cannot mandate good pedagogical relationships into existence. But they can shape the ecology in which these become more likely.

For affection, this means protecting time, continuity, shared projects, and small moments of mutual investment without forcing artificial harmony. A school that keeps students with the same teachers over time, and treats moments of humor, storytelling, or shared meaning as part of learning — rather than as distractions — makes it more likely that students feel welcomed and seen. That does not manufacture affection, but it gives affection room to grow.

There’s one further point worth adding here about teachers’ capacity to act as “climate setters” by embodying and modeling relational qualities. *Affection itself* requires a certain degree of subjective availability and emotional openness. As a teacher, you cannot foster affection without allowing yourself to be affected by your students. And to be affected is to make yourself somewhat vulnerable. If I close off my heart to my students, I am much less likely to be shaken or hurt by their words and actions — but I also limit the possibility of connection. So institutions support affection not only by giving students and teachers quality time together, but also by reducing the pressures that make teachers defensively close themselves off: overload, alienation, and the pressure to treat teaching as the delivery of an educational product rather than as a relational practice.

For authority, institutions need to back teachers' legitimate role in upholding norms. If a teacher tries to uphold norms of respectful dialogue but is isolated — with no administrative support, no peer alignment, and parents immediately contesting every boundary — authority becomes brittle. It may either collapse or become defensive, and thus more authoritarian. By contrast, when teachers are visibly supported in upholding fair norms, their authority is more likely to be experienced as protecting the shared space rather than policing it. There is also a broader institutional dimension here: for better or worse, monetary compensation remains one of the clearest public signals of social recognition. When teachers are better paid, their professional judgment — and therefore their legitimate exercise of authority — is more likely to be recognized as professional rather than merely personal.

Finally, for attentiveness, institutions need to protect slower rhythms: more time for listening, fewer interruptions. If a timetable constantly fragments attention — short periods, rushed transitions, heavy pacing pressure — then listening carefully becomes almost structurally irrational. A school supports attentiveness when it protects reflective time, allows slower discussion, and values depth of uptake over performance. But it also means giving teachers more of what I call attentional autonomy: the capacity to direct, sustain, and sometimes relinquish attention in the classroom, guided by pedagogically relevant reasons rather than extraneous constraints, such as overly prescriptive curricula or the anticipation of external evaluations (like the school inspections we have in Belgium). So this basically means leaving open space for teachers' professional judgment to shape the attentional space of the classroom.

So in each case, the point is not that institutions can prescribe affection, authority, or attentiveness directly. They cannot. But they can make them more or less plausible as features of everyday school life by addressing the institutional conditions that tend to sabotage them.

So, basically, I share the starting point of this conference: dialogue matters enormously for democratic education. What I have tried to argue is that dialogue does not become transformative by protocol alone. It needs a relational atmosphere in which students can actually risk being affected by one another. Affection, authority, and attentiveness are thus not soft extras around dialogue. They are part of what makes dialogue work. And if democratic dialogue is to matter, institutions must protect the relational ecology in which these qualities can take root.