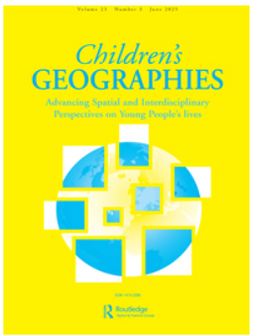

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Environments: tools of the educational trade or networked spaces of learning? Reflections at the intersection between learning environments and intergenerational relationships

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the concept of environments that enable as networked social spaces structured by expectations of personal expression, equal positioning of adults and children, and empowerment of all participants in communication. What is enabled by the environment are opportunities of intergenerational contact, centred on the person rather than the role. Environments that enable ic critically compared with the concept of enabling environment promoted by the English curriculum for Early Years education, to disentagle the latter from its underpinning adult-centric vision that approaches the environment as a tool of the educational trade. Enabling is purposeful: enabling children to achieve curricualr goals.. In the second part of the article, the coevolution of enabling environments and trust on expertise on the one hand, and the coevolution of environments that enable and personal trust on the other hand are discussed, arguing that the type of trust underpinning adults-children interactions may signal the ontological status of children vis-à-vis an intergenerational order. The final section of the article investigates the social conditions that make environments that enable viable places of intergenerational contact. Facilitation of agency will be discussed as a form of communication that can support personal trust in contexts of intergenerational agentic learning.

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Learning environments; early years education; personal trust; children's agency; dialogic pedagogy; facilitation

1. Introduction. Shifting the semantics

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the statutory framework for Early Years Education in England, positions the learning environments at the intersection between the *emotional* environment, relating to atmosphere, feelings and relationships, and the *physical* environment, declined as *indoor environment* or *outdoor environment*. In 2017, the curricular discourse on environments for playing and learning brought to the fore the concept of *enabling environments,* still recognised as one of the four core themes of the EYFS (Department for Education 2024). According to the EYFS, the coupling between the emotional environment and the physical environment, whether outdoor or indoor, becomes an *enabling environment* when a *stimulating and safe space offers children opportunities to play, to be, to learn and to explore both physically and mentally* (Department for Education 2024).

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The EYFS conceptualisation of enabling environment is not exempt from criticism. Even if the EYFS positions itself within a discourse of educational practice, driven by research and ideologically neutral, some of its cultural underpinnings can be unpacked. Keevers and Treleaven (2011) invite us to utilise *diffractive* questions to deconstruct the algid language of practice, to unpack possible ideological underpinnings. Diffractive questions are an exercise in critical reflexivity to disentangle the discourse of professional practices from its cultural and ideological background. Thus, diffractive questions can address the semantics of childhood and intergenerational relationships that underpin the concept of *enabling environments*.

Building on a critical approach to the hegemonic concept of enabling environment, this article proposes the concept of *environments that enable* as an element of theoretical innovation that aims to support investigation of the dynamic relationship between environment, learning and children's agency. This article combines the theoretical conceptualisation of enviornemnts that enables with the study of environments that enable as empirical places of intergenerational learning, and the social conditions that make them viable are discussed, focusing on the facilitation of children's agency and the promotion of dialogue.

Environments that enable is a conceptual tool that aims to contribute *shifting the semantics* that underpins the enabling environments, in particular the hierarchical positioning of children and adults in educational contexts. 'Shifting the semantics' is inspired, and wishes to evoke, the sociolinguistic concept of 'semantic shift'. It is essential to clarify that, in this article, semantics is utilised sociologically. In contemporary sociological theory, building on the socio-constructivist concept of social institutions (Berger and Luckmann 1966), *semantics* indicates the shared, generalised meanings that enable communication and social interaction, positioning participants in any social interaction (Stäheli 2010; Sakai 2020).

The *theory of positioning*, originating from the field of social psychology, encourages consideration that in a social space not all participants have equal access to rights and duties that allow performing specific actions, in a specific moment and with those specific co-participants. Harré defines a position as *a cluster of short-term disputable rights, obligations and duties* (Harré 2012, 193). Following Moghaddam and Harré (2010), positioning theory describes *how people use words (and discourse of all types) to locate themselves and others*, because *it is with words that we ascribe rights and claim them for ourselves and place duties on others* (Moghaddam and Harré 2010, 2).

The positioning of children and adults in educational contexts can be articulated in reflexive expectations and institutionalised forms of social cooperation, which constitute elements of a generational social semantics. Generational social semantics refers to *a system of relationships among social positions* (Alanen 2001a, 19). Thus, the positioning of children and adults as generational social semantics can be viewed as a social structure. Alanen's concept of *generationing* (Alanen 2001b) described the interplay between structure (generational social semantics) and individual agency in complex social processes through individuals and groups negotiate, challenge and (re)construct generational identities (Alanen 2001b).

Building on Alanen (2003) and Mayhall and Zeiher's (2003) work, intergenerational relationships can be viewed as a form of ordering of social relations, along the axes of generational semantics. In educational context, the way in which members of different generational groups are (and can be) engaged in each other's lives can be declined in the concept of *intergenerational learning* (Vanderbeck 2007). The concept of intergenerational learning develops from socio-cultural theories of learning, which contend that development and learning are embedded in the context of social relationships (Rogoff 1990), contextualised temporally and spatially (Sánchez et al. 2017). Intergenerational learning recognises the central role of relationships in learning, which is theorised as a participatory, collaborative process (Fitzpatrick and Halpenny 2022), and a context where children contribute to the (co) construction of knowledge (Alanen 2014). These concepts resonate powerfully with key characteristics of the generational semantics structuring environments that enable, as outlined above.

2. Enabling environments as tools of the educational 'trade'

Following an earlier review of the position of environment in the EYFS proposed by Farini and Scollan (2021), it is argued that the concept of enabling environment is entangled in an adult-centric vision. Adult-centric refers to the positioning of adults and children in enabling environments, as envisaged by the EYFS. Adult-centric describes a form of hierarchical positioning based on unequal epistemic authority that produces differential opportunities for active participation (Baraldi 2023; Farini and Scollan 2023; Scollan et al. 2025), which has been often conceptualised as reduced agency of children in educational interactions (Fielding 2010; Oswell 2013). An adult-centric vision can be critically scrutinised from the very definition of enabling environments proposed by the EYFS:

> enabling environments are rich, stimulating, and safe spaces that offer children opportunities to play, to learn and to explore both physically and cognitively (Department for Education 2024)

Adults are positioned as the demiurges who construct the *rich, stimulating and safe space* where children *find* opportunities to play, to learn and to explore both physically and mentally, Children *find* rather than *creating* opportunities to play and learn, as such opportunities are *offered to them*. A diffractive examination of the concept of enabling environments presented in the EYFS disentangles it from the underpinning adult-centric vision, where adults *enable children*, using the environment as an educational 'tool of the trade'. The EYFS is centred on the action of the adult demiurges who utilise the environment as an enabling tool. This is a vision that can be critically approached as consubstantial of a neo-liberal model sceptical about dispositions and values other than those typical of a performance-driven model (Fielding 2011) of human flourishing.

The Early Years Inspection Handbook, produced by the Office for Standards in Education in England (OFSTED) as a tool for inspectors to assess if Early Years settings meet curricular guidelines, can also be disentangled from an adult-centric vision underpinning it. Inspectors who visit Early Years settings are required to assess whether practitioners working with young children *create an environment that supports the intent of an ambitious and coherently planned and sequenced curriculum* (OFSTED, 2019, 34).

This instruction for OFSTED inspectors lends itself to critical observations. First, the purpose of enabling environment, *supporting*, is made ambiguous by the different meanings of supporting children emerging in the diverse professional cultures of adults working in Early Years settings. For example, the meaning of supporting children will be different from practitioners trained in Early Years education through specialised higher education programmes and a teacher undertaking primary school teacher's training with additional components related to working with young children. The former is more likely to understand support as scaffolding children's active participation in learning (Penn 2012; Canning 2014; Murray 2017); the latter is more likely to understand support as more stringent guidance (Farini and Scollan 2023).

Nevertheless, further critical examination suggests that the ambivalent meaning of support in the instruction for OFSTED does not affect the ontological positioning of adults as *responsible* for the creation of the enabling environment as well as responsible for children's positive interactions with the environment. The responsible adults work for children, on behalf of children, to provide what they, the adults, assess to be the children's needs. The emphasis on adults' responsibility *for* children positions OFSTED's approach to enabling environments within a children's needs paradigm, suggesting limited trust in children's contribution to their own education, and legitimises hierarchical generational order based on unequal epistemic status. Adults, owners of superior knowledge, are responsible for *creating* an environment that support the *intent* of a *coherently planned* and *sequenced curriculum*, driven by attainment of standardised performances that constitute the purpose of educational encounters in neo-liberal models (Fielding 2011). Adults are positioned as demiurges that create enabling environment *for* children. Enabling environments are tools of the trade for adult-defined educational curricula written *for* children, rather than *with* children.

Educational curricula are (coherently) planned, where planning refers to modelling the future based on present expectations and ambitions (Luhmann 2005). The voices of children in the present, their *interests* that inform their decision-making in the here-and-now are de facto silenced by curricular planning projected into the future. Black and Mayes (2020) invite us to consider that a robust strand of research indicates that the voices of children may be viewed as a risk in neo-liberal models of education (see the review of the policy landscape of student participation produced by Graham and colleagues, 2019), as a factor of 'uncertainty', because altered power relations can hinder the functionality of educational encounter as tool to efficiently achieve adult-defined learning outcomes. Utilising the conceptual arsenal of the theories of trust, the voice of children can be viewed as antagonistic to trust in educators' expertise and hierarchical epistemic positioning, which are both considered presuppositions of effective educational relationships (Flynn and Hayes 2021).

The educational curricula are not only planned; they are also *sequenced*, that is, based on standardised assumptions about the development of children that do not consider the uniqueness of each person (Osgood 2023). The unique person of the child is replaced, in the discourse of curricula, by a standardised role, the discursive reconstruction of the child in education: the pupil. The most recent reiteration of the EYFS (2024) confirms an adult-centric vision underpinning the concept of enabling environments. Emphasis is placed on a type of adults' leadership underpinned by a hierarchical generational order, where children have a subordinate, and conditional, access to the role of author of valid knowledge.

> Children learn and develop well in enabling environments with teaching and support from adults, who respond to their individual interests and needs and help them to build their learning over time. Children benefit from a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers'

The OFSTED discourse on the role of environments as learning spaces appears to be expression of a generational semantics that does not recognise those children/adults interdependencies in the (co)construction of knowledge that characterise the social spaces that can become places of intergenerational learning (Vanderbeck 2017).

3. Introducing environments that enable as networked social spaces

As previously introduced, this article discusses *environments that enable* as a conceptual tool to shift the semantics of generational relationships centred on the hierarchical positioning of adults and children which underpins the conceptualisation and practice of enabling environments.

However, it is important to highlight that enabling environment and environments that enable do not entertain a dichotomic relationship; rather, they occupy two positions of a continuum of pedagogical practices. For instance, the semantics of enabling environments includes the empowerment of children as decision-makers, as much as the semantics of environments that enable recognises the role of adults. Nevertheless, a difference concerns the ontological status of children. Enabling environment is centred on positive action by adults to transform a previously non-enabling environment. The status of adults as enablers in essential. This is not the case for environments that enable, because the environment is *understood as a network of relationships.*

Relationships networks are defined as all the close relationships in which an individual participates (Mooney and Laursen 2018). Utilising Blatterer's critical review of systemic psychological and social theories, relationships are here conceptualised as components of social semantics that operate both at individual level, as mental operations such as imagined interactions, and social level, bridging phases of non-interaction, which are constitutive elements of relationships (Blatterer 2015). As components of social semantics, relationships provide shared, generalised meanings that enable communication and social interaction (see section 1).

Environments that enable as networks of relationships extend to the material dimension (the position of children as authors of knowledge), the social dimension (the interactions between adults and children) and the temporal dimension (the recursive connection between interactions,

reproducing the semantics of intergenerational relationships). The network of relationships intersect with the social and physical spaces of intergenerational relationship. The tight couplings and coeval emergency of social networks and space invites to view environments that enable as *networked social spaces*. A networked social space is where children are positioned as authors of valid knowledge(s) and responsible decision-makers. Environments that enable position children as the *enabled* and as the *enabler*, that is, as stakeholders and authors of their own learning. The ethos and practice of environments that enable recognise the child as a legitimate author of knowledge, supporting the expression of such knowledges, therefore changing children's position in intergenerational relationships (Rinaldi 2006; Pahl 2007; Edwards 2016) and recognising the transformative potential for adults as well as for children of the process of intergenerational learning (Vanderbeck 2007; Whyte 2022).

What are the characteristics of the adults-children's relationships forming environments that enable as networks of relationships and social experiences? The next section will discuss the coevolution of enabling environments and trust on expertise on the one hand, and the coevolution of environments that enable and personal trust, on the other hand.

A theoretical discussion will be proposed to trace back trust based on expertise in the semantics of enabling environments, and personal trust in the semantics of environments that enable. This theoretical endeavour is justified by the idea that the type of trust mediating adult-children interactions influences expectations, mutual positioning of participants and meaning of communication, thus, characterising learning environments.

4. Learning environments as access points to education and scenarios of trust commitments

Trust is conceptualised in this article, as a medium of communication specialising in creating the conditions for the acceptance of communication (Luhmann 1988). Like all media of communication, for instance the medium of money in the economic system, or the medium of truth in the scientific system (Luhmann 1995), trust supports acceptance of communication (Luhmann 1988). Acceptance does not presuppose agreement with the communicated information, belief, command, plea and so on; rather, acceptance refers to the usage of communication (the contents and/or the intention) within the semantics of the social system. For example, the medium of money supports the acceptance of communication in the economic system. Any communication within the economic system is ultimately designed, understood, and reacted to, in monetary terms, even the decision to delay investments or expenditures.

Differently from money in the economic system and truth in the scientific system, the medium of trust is not system-specific. The scope of trust is at once broader and narrower than the scope of system-specific media of communication. It is broader because trust supports the acceptance of communication across all social systems. Trust mediates communication in the social system of science as much as in the social system of economy or in the social system of education. The scope of trust is narrower because trust specialises in supporting engagement in communication only when the outcomes of decision-making are uncertain (Coleman 2017). Like hope and faith, trust can support risky decision-making outside the familiar worlds of ordinary experiences (Kwong 2019). Milona (2019) convincingly argues that trust is composed of a desire and a belief that the expected outcomes of decision-making are attainable, supporting the theoretical position that counterfactual thinking does not provide a viable foundation for trust. Like hope, trust is susceptible to disappointment because, unlike faith, trust does not operate in counterfactual ways. For instance, failure can invite revoking trust, retreating to more familiar worlds (Stockdale 2017).

The social system of education needs children's trust. Children's trusting commitment in the interactions with educators is pivotal for the viability of education. Even the most successful learning journey starts for the child with the shock of displacement from familiar life-worlds where risk is (although this is not necessarily the case) limited (Giddens 1991), to enter unknown territories

(Risquez at al., 2007). Trust is necessary for children who leave familiar life worlds (Taylor and Harris-Evans 2018) to move into unfamiliar territories (Koranteng et al. 2019; McNair 2024), supporting them in engaging in new social interactions. As they enter education, children find themselves dealing with an environment where knowledge and experiences that have developed in other environments are often unapplicable (Taylor and Harris-Evans 2018). Children's access to the education system lends itself as an example of *de-territorialisation* (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). Although the de-territorialisation effect cannot be prevented, because it relates to an ontological shift in the life of children characteristic of modernity (de-territorialisation has been observed also in contexts of home education, see Bhopal and Myers 2018, as well as in educational process in the majority world, see Evans 2015; Jirata and Kjørholt 2015), it has been argued that children's trust in education may moderate the negative effect of de-territorialisation (Warming 2013; Farini 2014, 2019; Baraldi 2023).

Education is an unchartered territory for children (as well as for the professionals working in it!); the system is untransparent to children, even at the level of the concrete organisations that children are embedded in, such as schools. However, non-transparency of the system does not prevent trust-building. Giddens defines *access points* those social situations where the individual encounters a system embodied in other individuals and in the relationships with them. Referring to the interactions with the individuals that embody the system, the trustworthiness of the system can be evaluated (O'Neill 2018). Access points are crucial social spaces, characterised by a tension between inclusion and scepticism, between participation and alienation. Educators embody the education system that the child may or may not trust. Children's trusting commitments to the education system are based on lived experiences, because trust is necessarily relational (Domenicucci and Holton 2017), and levels of trust are influenced by specific interactions experienced at the access points.

Utilising Gidden's concept of access points, it becomes possible to recognise that spaces of learning, such as enabling environments and environments that enable can represent access points, greatly influencing intergenerational learning and the transformative potential of education for children and adults, including attitudes towards trusting commitments. An important theme for reflection concerns possible foundations of trust at the access points where children meet the education system.

5. A taxonomy of trust: trust based on expertise

Trust can be based on expertise. Within the discourse in, and on, education, trust in expertise underpins the semantics of the revival of teacher-centred methodologies, postulating the dependence of children's trusting commitment on adults' expert guidance, counselling and teaching (Kitchen 2014), substantial to the semantics of neo-liberal performance-driven models of education (Fielding 2011). However, expertise-centred teaching has been questioned for failing to acknowledge the autonomy of the child as a sense-making consciousness that can accept or reject education not only in relation to its contents, but also considering its underpinning intentions (Vanderstraeten and Biesta 2006; Warming 2013; specifically critical of the new-wave of teacher-centred approach are Farini 2019; Baraldi 2023; Farini and Scollan 2024b).

Trust in expertise concerns the engagement of children in environments designed and organised by adult experts to enable children's learning, according to planned sequential agendas: at this level, the social space of trust in expertise encounters the concept of enabling environments presented by the EYFS and OFSTED. Expertise is the premise for communication between the teacher-as-expert and the child. Nevertheless, expertise offers fragile foundations for interpersonal trust (Luhmann 1988; Giddens 1991). In educational interactions, trust in expertise does not concern the adult–child interpersonal trusting relationship, because expertise refers to standardised expectations, not to expectations of personal contributions (Baraldi 2014).

Trust in expertise presupposes the hierarchical positioning of participants, based on unequal *epistemic authority*, concerning the access to the role of author of valid knowledge (Heritage and

Raymond 2005). As previously discussed, hierarchical positioning based on unequal epistemic authority produces differential opportunities for active participation, hindering the possibility of children's agency in educational interactions (Oswell 2013; Mikuska, Raffai, and Vukov Raffai 2024). Because enabling environments are ontologically substantiated by adults' expertise (they are the outcome of adult expert design of learning spaces), they are underpinned by hierarchical positioning in terms of epistemic authority. The reduced opportunities for agency in enabling environments are intrinsic to the hierarchical positioning substantial to trust based on expertise and may affect the *child*'s inclination towards trusting commitments. Hierarchical positioning reduces opportunities to *learn trust* by taking the risk of engaging in social interactions structured by expectations of personal expression rather than expectations of role performances (Baraldi 2014).

6. A taxonomy of trust: personal trust in environments that enable

For over a decade, research has challenged the viability of interpersonal trust building between adults and children in social contexts structured by hierarchical positioning and expectations of role performances, as documented by the collective work on intergenerational trust dynamic coordinated by Warming (2013).

Utilising Giddens' theory of trust commitments (Giddens 1991), it is possible to recognise situations where trust can be built through interpersonal affective relationships that mobilise trust through a process of mutual disclosure. This introduces a type of trust that radically differs from trust based on expertise, because trusting commitments are motivated by the relationship between persons (Giddens 1991), rather than the evaluation of role performances, as it is for trust based on expertise.

The social viability of interpersonal trust in education observed by research in the twenty-first century is related to an ongoing transformation of *generationing* practices of 'doing generation', which are structuring a new *intergenerational order* (Alanen 2019) where a plea for the recognition of children's citizenship in education (Percy-Smith 2010; Riddell, Kay, and Tisdall 2021; Baraldi 2023) becomes viable. Children's citizenship in education presupposes the recognition of children's self-determination rights, and their empowerment as authors of valid knowledge (Invernizzi and Williams 2008; Kjørholt and Qvortrup 2012). A poignant example of a shift in the positioning of children and adults within the generationing discourse is offered by a quote from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005)

> Children actively make sense of the physical, social and cultural dimensions of the world they inhabit, learning progressively from their activities and their interactions with others, children as well as adults

Children *learn progressively from their activities and their interactions with others* entailing a recognition of children's role as authors, or co-authors, of their own learning and knowledge makers, just as adults are, of the environments they inhabit. *Learning from interactions* means that learning is not the outcome of children's internalisation of knowledge transmitted by adults. Rather, it is a process whereby children *actively make sense of the physical, social and cultural dimensions of the world that they inhabit*. Children's position as authors of valid knowledge in social interactions invites conceptualisation of trust as a relational (Domenicucci and Holton 2017) and dynamic concept (Warming 2013), built through recursive interactions, in line with Domenicucci and Holton connotation of trust as a two-place relation (2017). This means trust is a presupposition of intergenerational dialogue towards intergenerational learning that is transformational for both children and adults (Dunlop et al., 2024; Vanderbeck 2007; Black and Mayes 2020).

7. The co-evolution of personal trust and environments that enable

Research focusing on pedagogical innovation has explored the possibility of trust based on personal relationships in education, evidencing the importance of children's self-determination as the

condition for the development of personal trust between adults and children (Harris and Kaur 2012 ; Farini and Scollan 2023).

It is possible to conceptualise a co-evolution between equality in epistemic rights in intergenerational relationships; personal trust; the evolution of environments that enable. The position of children as authors of valid knowledge is conducive to the development of personal trust as well as to the emergence of environments that enable.

Children's status as author of valid knowledge promotes both personal trust and the development of environments that enable by (1) orientating communication towards expectations of personal contributions; (2) facilitating equality in active participation; (3) empowering self-determination and autonomy in children's choices. Personal trust is a condition for the recognition of children as authors of valid knowledge, because it values mutual disclosure and affectivity, rather than role-related performances.

Trust based on interpersonal relationships is a tenet of environments that enable, which have been already conceptualised as networks of relationships, that can be now further qualified as networks of relationships where expectations of role performances are replaced by expectation of personal contributions, where control is replaced with trust and embracing risk of promoting the expression of personal uniqueness. Environments that enable can be sustained only if adults access space and time to interact with children dialogically (Baraldi 2023). Jones and Walker (2012), and Jones and Welch (2013) propose an insightful reflection that can be used by professionals who wish to promote children's voice in dialogical interactions towards the construction of environments that enable. Jones, Walker and Welch invite adults to see themselves as *commentators* of children's contribution in the context of dialogic interactions. As commentators, adults build their contributions around children's contributions, constructing a vision of children as active agents that can contribute with opinions, interests, and valid knowledge to intergenerational learning.

Summarising the discussion of the coevolution of environments that enable, and personal trust developed across sections 6 and 7, it is possible to suggest that personal trust is essential to mediate communication in environments.

Personal trust refers to the relationship between persons, not to the evaluation of role performances. Personal trust relies on expectations of personal expression, in the context of non-hierarchical positioning of children and adults, based on equal epistemic authority. The evolution of personal trust creates the social conditions for the evolution of environments that enable as *networked social spaces,* structured by expectations of personal expression.

In the next section of the article, the discussion around the concept of environments that enable, which was prompted by a critical review of the cultural underpinnings of the concept of enabling environments presented in the EYFS, will be contextualised within the discourse on children's agency in education. In the second part of the section, environments that enable as spaces of, for and from children's agency, will be investigated regarding the form of communication that is compatible with emerging dialogic communication.

8. Environments that enable as spaces of, for, and from children's agency

When referred to children, *agency* is a debated concept, as suggested by recent literature that presents several concurring definitions of children's agency (Oswell 2013; Stoecklin and Fattore 2017; Farini and Scollan 2019; Larkins 2019; Baraldi 2023). However, a review of sociological literature allows identification of a common conceptual baseline: children's agency describes social encounters where children's actions are understood by all participants as a form of participation based on the availability of choices of action exceeding the re-action to adults' actions.

It is true that children's active participation can happen in any social context. The reaction to adults' inputs (for instance, answering a teachers' question in the classroom) is a form of active participation. However, agency can be achieved only under specific social conditions, because structural constraints can influence the nature of individual participation. This is particularly true for

children in educational contexts, who are included within a hierarchical generational order where teachers are positioned as higher epistemic authorities.

The reflective expectation (shared by children and adults) of availability of choices for children's action introduces the possibility of alternative courses of action, generating complexity in children's personal trajectories of lived experience (Khatun and Logan 2023). Within educational spaces, agency may refer to children's choices signalling autonomous access to domains of knowledge (Baraldi 2021), and the position of children as authors of valid knowledge, what Heritage and Raymond (2005) define epistemic status. The intersection between children's choices (agency) and the social context (epistemic authority and epistemic status) contextualises empirical educational interactions (Dotson, Vaquera, and Argeseanu Cunningham 2014; Baraldi 2015) which can be metaphorically imagined as the building blocks for the construction of learning spaces.

Facilitation of children's agency (henceforth: facilitation) describes interactions where adults' actions that systematically support children's agency are intertwined with children's actions that display agency. Facilitation is the use of actions-in-interactions that promote: the fair distribution of active participation in interactions (equity); expressions of sensitivity to interlocutors' interests and/or needs (empathy); and the treatment of disagreements and alternative perspectives as enrichments in communication (empowerment) (Bamberg 2011; Baraldi, Farini, and Ślusarczyk 2022; Farini, Baraldi, and Scollan 2023).

Facilitation is a form of communication that upgrades children's epistemic authority, which is a condition for the emergence of environments that enable, where equity, empathy and expectations of personal expression replace expectation of role performances (Baraldi and Iervese 2014). For example, recent research concerning the practice of facilitation in England, Poland and Italy (Baraldi, Farini, and Ślusarczyk 2022) suggests that facilitation can sustain dialogue in pedagogical activities within interactions where children are positioned as authors of valid knowledge in form of narratives produces to share perspectives, experiences, and emotions. This research converges with the results of other studies in the field of intergenerational geographies that emphasise the potential of intergenerational storytelling is the construction of positive personal and social identities, also in situations of crisis (Yilmaz et al. 2024).

In educational contexts, facilitation positions both educators and learners as holders of rights and responsibilities for constructing knowledge, promoting the epistemic authority (Heritage and Raymond 2005) of all participants in educational interactions, which is particularly poignant in contexts where the educational relationship intersects inter-generational relationships.

Although research on teacher-children interactions have discussed forms of communication that mitigate hierarchical epistemic authority, such as scaffolding (Sharpe 2008) or revoicing (O'Connor and Michaels 1996), it is apparent that the mitigation of hierarchical epistemic authority: (1) depends on adults' initiatives; (2) mitigates, but does not question, the hierarchical positioning of adults and children with regard to the rights to access and produce knowledge.

Dialogic pedagogy, when practiced in form of facilitation, can create the social conditions for the dialogic forms of pedagogy by opening interactive spaces for children's agency as expression of knowledge, fulfilling a vision of children as potential leaders in their own learning (Bakhtin 1981; Mercer and Littleton 2007).

Alexander (2018) presents dialogic pedagogy as a form of communication that aims to create conditions for mutual learning, children from adults, adults from children, based on dialogue. For two decades, a stream of research has been devoted to dialogic practices in educational contexts.Amadasi and Iervese (2018) suggest that dialogue can change the position of educators by shifting the expectations of educational communication towards expectations of children's agency.

Dialogue is understood as a specific form of communication that cannot be reduced to the mere description of generic communicative exchanges (Bohm 1996; Baraldi and Iervese 2017; Baraldi, Farini, and Ślusarczyk 2022; Baraldi 2023; Farini, Baraldi, and Scollan 2023). There are essential conditions for a communicative exchange to be dialogical: communication, whether face to face interaction (Baraldi 2023) or mediated by digital technology (Farini and Scollan 2024a) is dialogical

when characterised by equity, empathy and empowerment of participants access to the role of authors of knowledge (Kirby 2020; Paterson-Young et al. 2024).

The concept of dialogic pedagogy discussed in this article can be related with coeval research on intergenerational learning that represents an important contribution from intergenerational geographies. Introducing a collective work on intergenerational learning, Kaplan and colleagues (2020), elaborate on the concept of Intergenerational Contact Zone (ICZ) as spaces where inhabitants cooperate in 'meaning making' processes where individual meanings intersect and cross-fertilise, through interactions that are structured by norms and expectations for the intergenerational engagement, that is, by social semantics. Dialogic pedagogy can be utilised to describe intergenerational meaning making processes structured by a semantic of equal epistemic rights and equal opportunity for active participation across generations. A semantic of equal epistemic rights structures environments that enable as ICZs, that is, as spaces that promote intergenerational communication (Yamamoto and Tang 2020).

Facilitation can be conceptualised as a form of *centrifugal* language (Bakhtin 1981) that multiplies diversity, both cultural and individual. Following Bakhtin's argument, and applying it to educational interaction, *centrifugal* dynamics indicates communication where expectations do not concern established patterns of action, and established patterns of responses to action. Rather, centrifugal dynamics refers to expectations of choices among alternatives, creativity, autonomy, and self-determination. Facilitation can therefore be described as a centrifugal force that creates expectations of self-determination, unique contributions, and unpredictability. Centrifugal communication is mediated by trust based on personal relationships, as well as the form of communication that structures environments that enable. As suggested by Tang (2015) , the encounter between diverse cultural perspectives that often characterises intergenerational dialogue, entails the potential for tension and even confrontation. However, Tang also suggests that the encounter between diverse cultural perspectives also entails the potential for greater intergenerational co-construction of meanings between children and adults, if efforts are made to construct interaction dynamics that bridge diverse generational perspectives and experience. It is believed that facilitation of agency, based on the positioning of all participants in interaction as legitimate authors of knowledge may contribute to positive intergenerational meaning-making processes.

Bae (2012), argues that the hierarchy in epistemic authority between adults and children do not support trust in children's authorship of knowledge. Genuine dialogic pedagogy should therefore offer spaces for children and adults to interact independently from the influence of hierarchical structures. Bae (2012) defines this as *spacious patterns* of interactive situations where the limits imposed by the hierarchical positioning of adults and children are suspended leaving room for equality in the possibility of participation, empathy and empowerment. The concept of spacious patterns can be utilised to connotate the local social context of adult-children interaction within environments that enable, transforming educational contexts in ICZs that enhance intergenerational relationships (Kaplan et al. 2017). Facilitation is instrumental to intergenerational learning by promoting a relational, communal view of the self that puts relationships at the heart of learning (Fielding 2010). Structured by facilitation, environment that enables are *places for restless encounters* between adults and children in which they are able to re-see and re-engage with each other in creative, holistic way that have transformative potential for children and adults (Fielding 2010). Facilitation can therefore answer Gallagher and Fitzpatrick (2017) emphasis on the sustainability of intergenerational dialogue. Facilitation can transform educational interactions into places where children's choices and personal initiatives are promoted, upgrading children's epistemic authority, and positioning them as agents with rights and responsibilities for producing knowledge. Positioning children as legitimate authors of knowledge, facilitation creates the conditions for intergenerational learning by providing rich and mutually supportive opportunities for children and adults to learn together (Beynon and Lang 2017). Facilitation transforms educational spaces in places of intergeneration dialogic communication, where interactions are structured by reflexive expectations of personal expression (Allen et al. 2019). The centrality of expectations of personal

expression can be viewed as the essential social condition for mutual awareness between generations, allowing participants in communication to bridge diverse perspectives and experience (Tang 2015).

9. Conclusion

This article proposes a theoretical elaboration of the innovative concept of environments that enable, aiming to offer possible intellectual foundations of pedagogical practices in networked social spaces structured by expectations of personal expression, equal positioning of adults and children, and empowerment of children as authors of valid knowledge.

Environments that enable is a concept that responds to Mannion and Gilbert's invitation to consider learning spaces not as backdrop to intergenerational learning, but as integral component of intergenerational learning, recognising that generational relationships are linked to place-person relations (Mannion and Gilbert 2015). In conclusion of our theoretical discussion, we suggest that environment that enables, structured by a semantic of equal epistemic rights and co-authorship of knowledge are learning *places* of intergenerational learning in the dialogic encounters between diverse stocks of social capital (Webster et al. 2024). Intergenerational dialogue may be a centrifugal force that fuels participatory, collaborative process (Fitzpatrick and Halpenny 2022) with transformative potential for children and adults (Fielding 2011).

By trusting and upgrading children's epistemic authority in interactions, environments that enable promote expectations of children's agency, thus contributing to the transformation of the structures of intergenerational order (Qvortrup, Corsaro, and Honig 2005; Alanen 2009).

This article has proposed a theoretical discussion to produce a concept of environments that enable, contextualising it at the intersection between generational semantics and intergenerational learning. The concept of environments that enable, founded on the intergenerational learning principle that learning is socially (Rogoff 1990), temporally (Farini 2019) and spatially (Sánchez et al. 2018) contextualised, has been investigated in this article regarding the conditions that make it viable, therefore focusing on forms of communication that can support personal trust. This analytical approach appears to be coherent with the central role of positive relationships in learning, recognised by the theory of intergenerational learning.

Tang and Kaplan (2013)) propose a semantic distinction between 'space' and 'place'. While space in environmental terms has specific physical dimensions, place is also defined by one's emotional feeling and a sense of belonging to the space. In other words, a 'space' becomes a 'place' once it has meaning for someone. We believe that environments that enable can convert the educational spaces of intergenerational relationships in educational *places* of intergenerational relationships, where the sense of belonging is fuelled by personal trust that positions persons and expectations of personal contributions, rather than the roles and expectations of standardised performances, as main references for communication. This process is based on the acknowledgment of participants' status as authors of valid knowledge. Introducing Buber's powerful language, the challenge for education concerns the transformation of educational relationships from an '*I to It*' model, where the *It*, the pupil, is the 'other' projected by expectations and planning, to an '*I to Thou*' model, based on the acknowledgement of the incommensurable alterity of the 'other', of the *Thou*, the child (Buber 2004).

Buber's I to Thou model can be related to the work of Biggs, and colleagues, on *generational intelligence*. The semantic shift from expectations of role performances to expectations of personal expression is essential condition for generational intelligence, convincingly conceptualised as the ability to put oneself in the position of other age groups, negotiating empathic generational relations (Biggs and Carr 2015; Haapala, Tervo, and Biggs 2014).

The authors are currently building a large corpus of recorded education activities where facilitation is used to promote dialogic pedagogy, to observe if, and how, such educational activities present the characteristic of environments that enable, to evaluate the epistemological power of the concept.

For now, as a concluding remark, the authors would emphasise that the pedagogical demands of environments that enable should be acknowledged and recognised; however, if children are to be taken seriously as primary stakeholders in their education, as well as citizens who have a right to be consulted and heard, then avoiding the risk of trusting children's decision making, creativity and social skills is a luxury that education should not, and the authors would say *cannot*, afford.

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