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A critical comparison between democratic, neo-Vygotskian and dialogic pedagogies

Federico Farini ^a and Angela Scollan ^b

^aCentre for Psychological and Sociological Sciences, University of Northampton, Northampton, UK;

^bDepartment of Education, Middlesex University, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Based on a thorough consideration of pedagogical and sociological literature, combined with authors' reflections on their own research with children, this article pursues two interrelated objectives. The first objective is discussing the circular relationships between facilitation of children's agency and dialogue in educational contexts: facilitation is a dialogical form of communication, and a methodology to secure the sustainability of dialogue in educational interactions. Descending from the first, the second objective is to propose a critical comparison between facilitation of children's agency, democratic pedagogies and neo-Vygotskian methodologies, considering the intersection between facilitation of children's agency, democratic pedagogies and neo-Vygotskian methodologies, and the social structures underpinned by generational order. Although shared ethical and methodological underpinnings are identified, it is argued that the facilitation of children's agency is more compatible with the construction of sustainable dialogic pedagogies because it positions children as authors of valid knowledge in educational interactions.

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Dialogic pedagogy and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child mandate

Thirty-five years ago, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) introduced important rights with regard to the protection and education of children. At the same time, the UNCRC also introduced references to children's agency through a series of rights related to participation. For example: children's right to express views and to be heard in administrative and juridical practices, children's right of personal expression and thinking, children's right to participate in cultural and artistic activities.

From its approval and ratifications, the application of the UNCRC has been conditioned by social structures that define a *generational order* (Alanen 2009), distinguishing between adults and children's decisional power, sometimes marginalising children's rights in empirical social practices. The concept of generational order translates to inter-

CONTACT Federico Farini  federico.farini@northampton.ac.uk  Centre for Psychological and Sociological Sciences, University of Northampton, Waterside Campus, University Drive, Northampton NN1 5PH

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generational relationships, the idea that social lives are structured by intersections between social and cultural factors.

The concept of intersectionality has become popular in social sciences (Kaukko and Wernesjö 2017; Mason 2010). Generational order applies intersectionality to the position of children in inter-generational relationships. Children's contribution to the construction of social relations may be obscured by intersecting cultural or social factors including, among others, children's legal status and cultural factors such as narratives of the vulnerability and incapacity of children.

The theory of *generationing* (Alanen 2001) develops from the theory of generational order. Generationing argues that age, legal status, material dependence on adults, narratives of vulnerability and adults' duty of care intersect to construct forms of hierarchical inter-generational relationships across all social contexts. These include the education system, where narratives of children's incapacity and adults' duty of care underpin hierarchical inter-generational relationships (James and James 2004). Against this background, the school can be assigned the task of 'acculturating' children (Horenczyk and Tatar 2012) through the conveyance of (1) knowledge (curriculum content, course content); (2) norms (rewarded and sanctioned behaviours); (3) values (recognition of children as a cultural group).

Knowledge, norms and values are conveyed and evaluated in classroom interactions (Luhmann 2002; Mehan 1979), and structures of classroom interaction led to children's adaptation to the school context (Janta and Harte 2016; Szalai 2011).

The positioning of children in educational encounters hinders their potential exercise of agency, therefore, their right to participate actively in the context of their social experiences as envisaged by the UNCRC. Thus, the functionality of an education system based on hierarchical inter-generational relationships can become the object of critical consideration regarding children's rights of agentic participation. Supported by a critical review of pedagogical and sociological literature, combined with the authors' reflection on their own research with children, this article pursues two interrelated objectives. The first objective is a discussion of the circular relationships between the facilitation of children's agency and dialogue in educational contexts. The second objective is to propose a critical comparison between facilitation of children's agency, democratic pedagogies and neo-Vygotskian methodologies, considering their intersections with generationing in educational settings. Although shared ethical and methodological underpinnings are identified, it is argued that the facilitation of children's agency is more compatible with dialogic pedagogies because it positions children as the authors of valid knowledge. The recognition of children's epistemic authority in educational interactions is an essential condition for the construction of sustainable dialogic pedagogy. In conclusion, the article proposes facilitation as a form of educational communication that can fulfil the ambition of transforming educational interactions in local social contexts where sustainable dialogical pedagogy can flourish in response to the UNCRC mandate to promote children's self-determination (Farini and Scollan 2024).

A semantic of children's self-determination: the meaning of agency, facilitation and dialogue

Agency in educational interaction as access to domains of knowledge

In this section, a definition of children's agency rooted in literature from the field of childhood studies is proposed. The definition of agency is contextualised in educational settings as children's access to domains of knowledge and children's access to the role of authors of knowledge.

Although the concept of children's agency is nuanced (Baraldi and Cockburn 2018; Oswell 2013) it is possible to identify a common thread: children's agency is related to actions that are not simple outputs of children's experiences of adults' inputs. Agency defines a form of active participation based on the availability of choices of action that can enhance change in social contexts, for example, in classroom interactions (Baraldi 2023; Larkins 2019; Stoecklin and Fattore 2017).

A conceptual distinction is therefore observed between children's active participation and children's agency. Children's active participation can happen in any social context. A compliant reaction to an adult input (for example, answering a teachers' question during a lesson) is a form of active participation. However, while children's active participation can happen at any time in communication, the achievement of agency needs children's active participation to be expressed as choices that can make a difference in their social context (Holliday and Amadasí 2020), not as simple re-actions to others' actions.

Within educational contexts, children's agency may refer to choices that enhance autonomous access to domains of knowledge (*epistemic authority*: Heritage and Raymond 2005). Children's agency may also refer to choices that position children as authors of valid knowledge (*epistemic status*: Heritage and Raymond 2005). The intersection between children's actions that display autonomous access to knowledge and authorship of knowledge, and adults' reactions contextualises educational interactions (Baraldi 2015; Dotson, Vaquera, and Argeseanu Cunningham 2014).

To be consistent with an intersectional approach, the analysis of children's agency must consider the structural constraints on individual participation within a hierarchical generational order (Bjerke 2011; Kirby 2020; Leonard 2016). This is the case, for instance, of the education system where teachers' higher epistemic authority and status (Baraldi 2023) legitimises their responsibility for being sole authors and conveyers of knowledge. Positioned with an inferior epistemic status, children's actions are conceptualised, observed and evaluated as responses to teachers' actions (Delamont 1976; Luhmann 2002; Mehan 1979).

Since pioneering works in the 1970s, research on teacher–child interactions has produced a more nuanced picture highlighting some mitigation of hierarchical forms of epistemic authority (e.g., Mercer and Littleton 2007; Walsh 2011), such as actions of scaffolding (Sharpe 2008) or *revoicing* (O'Connor and Michaels 1996). These forms of mitigation are often underpinned by Vygotsky's pedagogy and will be the object of a critical review below. However, it can be anticipated that their mitigation of hierarchical epistemic authority depends on adults taking the initiative. Thus, it does not trouble the

hierarchical positioning of adults and children based on unequal epistemic authority and epistemic status.

Creating the social conditions of dialogue: facilitation of children's agency as promotion of children's authorship of knowledge

This section introduces the methodology of facilitation used to upgrade children's epistemic authority and epistemic status to promote their agency in educational settings. It is argued that, by upgrading children's epistemic authority and epistemic status, facilitation creates favourable conditions for the development of dialogue.

Since the 2010s, sociological and socio-pedagogical works in Childhood Studies have focused attention on the facilitation of children's agency as a way of enhancing dialogic pedagogy (Baraldi 2023; Baraldi, Joslyn, and Farini 2021; Farini and Scollan 2023). Facilitation recognises mutual interdependence and respect for children's views and experiences as the social conditions for the promotion of their agency (Fitzgerald et al. 2010). Mutual interdependence may refer to children and adults' co-construction of educational interactions. Respect for children's views and experiences may refer to their epistemic rights.

Hill and colleagues' analysis of facilitative practices in education highlights that 'both children and adults are co-constructors of knowledge and expertise' (Hill et al. 2004, 84). Enhancing children's agency in educational settings recognises their authority and status as holders of rights and authors of knowledge (Baraldi 2023). In educational contexts, facilitation positions both educators and learners as holders of rights and responsibilities with regard to constructing knowledge, upgrading the epistemic authority and the epistemic status of all participants in interactions. This is particularly poignant in contexts where educational relationships intersect generational order. It is possible to distinguish the facilitation of agency from hierarchical teaching regarding the enhancement of children's epistemic rights. Facilitating children's agency implies dealing with children as persons who can express their own points of view, experiences, and emotions rather than dealing with them as fulfilling standardised roles, evaluated for their performances.

Facilitation of children's agency is achieved in specific interactions where adults' actions support children's agency, and children's actions display agency. For this reason, facilitation of children's agency is a methodology that creates the social conditions for dialogic pedagogy. Rather than the mere description of communicative exchanges, dialogue is conceptualised as a form of communication that empowers expressions of different perspectives, promotes equity in the distribution of participation, and highlights sensitivity for this participation (Baraldi and Iervese 2017; Farini, Baraldi, and Scollan 2023; White 2014). Like all forms of communication, dialogue can be observed both as a process and an outcome (Luhmann 1995). Dialogue can be observed as a process if attention is focused on the sequences of actions-in-interaction (including asynchronous interactions) that construct shared meanings. Dialogue can be seen as an outcome if attention is given to the reflexive expectations, stabilised over time in communication processes, which become viable structures of social interaction (Blatterer 2024).

Davies (2008) and Kirby (2020) contribute a taxonomy of dialogue. Dialogue is based on: (a) the fair distribution of active participation in interactions (equity); (b) expressions of sensitivity to interlocutors' interests and/or needs (empathy); and (c) the treatment of

disagreements and alternative perspectives as enrichments in communication (empowerment).

For two decades, a strand of research has been devoted to dialogic practices in schools. Skidmore and Murakami (2016) demonstrate that dialogue can shift the expectations of educational communication towards children's agency. Agency can be displayed in interaction as high epistemic authority and epistemic status (Amadasí and Iervese 2018). In adult-child interactions, dialogue has been defined by Matthews as 'the starting point, whereby children are consulted and listened to, ensuring that their ideas are taken seriously' (Matthews 2003, 268). Facilitation of children's agency can upgrade their epistemic rights promoting children's self-expression, taking their views into account, sharing power and responsibility of constructing knowledge with them (Shier 2001). In this way, facilitation constructs the social conditions for the development of dialogue.

Three clarifications to contextualise the article socially, culturally and methodologically

This section offers three clarifications that can help position this article socially, culturally and methodologically.

First, the authors have worked and researched extensively (although not exclusively) with young children, particularly with 4- and 5-year olds transitioning between Early Years and Primary Education. This is a *social* contextualisation that might qualify the argument proposed in this article. We would emphasise our desire to contribute to a debate at the intersection between pedagogy and children's rights which is not limited to the early stages of education. In fact, this is a debate that is flourishing and expanding across all levels of education, from Early Years (Farini and Scollan 2023), to Primary (Jerome and Starkey 2022; Manyukhina 2022) and Secondary Education (Schoots-Snijder, Tigelaar, and Admiraal 2025).

A *cultural* contextualisation of the article positions the discussion of facilitation with the empirical diversity of cultural and educational contexts. The prevailing understanding of childhood and education underpinning the debate on the promotion of children's agency is oriented by cultural forms produced in the evolution of Western society (Mangez and Vanden Broeck 2021). However, it would be a methodological and ethical weakness if the relevance of diverse cultural perspectives on childhood and education were not acknowledged. Although a discussion of different semantics of childhood, education and generational order falls outside the scope of this article, attention is drawn to the collections of essays edited by Percy-Smith and colleagues (Percy-Smith et al. 2023) and Phillips and Ritchie (2025), as well as to the work of Bertoli and colleagues (Bertoli et al. 2024). These academic works provide examples of sociological research with children in contexts where western cultural perspectives do not hegemonise discourses about, with and from children. In socio-cultural contexts where hierarchical inter-generational arrangements and strong obligations towards the collective prevail, the meaning of children's agency diverts from the dictate of the UNCRC and may refer to children's autonomous acceptance of adults' authority (Kaukko and Wernesjö 2017) and their cooperation in the reproduction of the social order (Bühler-Niederberger and Schwittek 2022).

At the same time, it is important to highlight research contributions indicating that facilitation can be successfully practiced in socio-cultural contexts that are not

conducive to the exercise of a western concept of children's agency (André and Godin 2014; Clemensen 2016). This requires a flexible approach to children's agency (Wyness 2014) and the acceptance of creative forms of agency, supported by a carefully designed methodology based on the reflective co-construction of expectations between children and adults (Sadegh 2022). We embrace the epistemological tenet that cultural diversity cannot be neglected. This observation, however, may be accompanied by the observation that the UNCRC is a genuinely global cultural product that has been ratified by all countries in the world, except for the United States of America. Thus, we believe that the aim of this article should be also seen as globally relevant.

The relationships between facilitation and the cultural context of educational practices will be the object of further reflections when the structural limitations of facilitation and possible solutions are discussed (below).

Related to the influence of the socio-cultural context and additional to the consideration of cultural diversity, is the observation that constraints to adults' trust in children's agency may emerge in educational practices. For example, children's initiatives may be rejected if their choices are seen as a threat to safeguarding (Bjerke 2011; Farini and Scollan 2019; Valentine 2011). Tovey (2007) and Tovey and Waller (2014) discuss situations where adults may not trust children-decision making because of past experiences, because of inherited expectations or because they are in fear of their own responsibilities. However, possible imitations imposed by safeguarding concerns, which can be seen as another component of the socio-cultural context, should not detract from the possibility of facilitation becoming a context that promotes children's autonomous access to domains of knowledge in social interactions (epistemic authority), and children's status as authors of knowledge (epistemic status).

A third clarification contextualises the article *methodologically*, helping to define its aim. This article discusses the facilitation of children's agency in education to create the social conditions for dialogic pedagogy. This aim is pursued by focusing on adult-child interactions. This is a methodological choice with epistemological implications, motivated by our specialism, as well as related to the material limitations of the format of an academic article. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that an important context of children's agency may consist in peer-to-peer interactions. For this reason, we suggest attention be paid to the robust tradition of research focusing on children's display of agency in the context of peer-interactions (recent works include, among others, Choi 2020; Nolan and Moore 2024), because it may offer a valuable integration to the discussion proposed here.

Facilitation and dialogic pedagogy

In this section, we discuss a theoretical connection between the facilitation of children's agency and dialogic pedagogy.

The main tenet of this article is that the facilitation of children's agency, as an upgrading of their epistemic rights, can enhance dialogic pedagogy. Dialogic pedagogy is recognised as a Bakhtinian centrifugal force, transforming education into a space of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981), where non-hierarchical sharing of knowledge and experiences are constructed (Bakhtin 1984), in this way fulfilling the UNCRC vision of children as agents in their own learning (Mercer and Littleton 2007).

In the Bakhtinian theoretical framework, ‘centrifugal’ describes 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 and autonomy. Facilitation can be described as a centrifugal force that creates expectations of self-determination (Schultz-Jørgensen, Leth, and Montgomery 2011), unique contributions and unpredictability (Bae 2012). Bae defines *spacious patterns* of interactions as those encounters where the hierarchical positioning of adults and children is suspended, leaving room for equality in the possibility of participation.

The idea of dialogic pedagogy as a centrifugal force is coherent with the results of pioneering research from Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) who argue that dialogic approaches may offer more scope for negotiation, freedom of expression, perspectives, and collaboration than teacher-led education. Along the same lines, Skidmore and Murakami (2016) suggest that dialogic pedagogy can provide opportunities to co-construct meanings and contexts of educational encounters, because both adults and children are positioned as authors of valid knowledge in interaction. Skidmore and Murakami connect dialogic pedagogy with agency (the co-construction of meanings and contexts of the educational encounters). They also connect agency with the position of children as holders of epistemic authority (children as authors of valid knowledge in interactions).

Dialogic pedagogy enhanced by the facilitation of children’s agency aims to consistently upgrade children’s epistemic authority and epistemic status. For example, recent research concerning facilitation in English, Polish, and Italian Schools Primary Schools (Baraldi, Farini, and Ślusarczyk 2022) suggests that facilitation can sustain dialogue in pedagogical activities, positioning children as authors of valid knowledge in the form of narratives that share perspectives, experiences, and emotions.

Facilitation of children’s agency becomes relevant for educational practices, because it secures the sustainability of dialogical pedagogy as a practice that transforms educational interactions into social contexts where children’s choices and personal initiatives are promoted.

When children’s agency makes a difference: a critical comparison between democratic pedagogy and dialogic pedagogies

This section of the article argues that the position of children vis-à-vis their epistemic rights in educational interactions distinguishes *democratic pedagogy* from dialogic pedagogy.

Discussing the semantics of democracy in modern society, Carr and Hartnett (1996) question whether children are included in the *demos*. Carr and Hartnett’s critical remarks are particularly pertinent for education because they refer to the possibility of children actively participating in the construction of knowledge in educational contexts. Lipman (2003, 2008) defines *democratic* as a form of pedagogy where teachers and children co-construct a community of inquiry. Lipman presents democratic pedagogy as a reflective process of inquiry that involves problem-solving, shared reasoning and, crucially for this article, dialogue.

Listening to children and the promotion of the voices of all participants in education are key also for the influential methodology of democratic education presented by Dewey (1916). Dewey's methodology is based on *experiential learning* requiring the active participation of learners. The active participation of learners requires listening to their voices to fuel their engagement, and subsequently to use their experiences as a resource for education (Levinson 2012). Dewey's democratic education promotes the voices of learners as a resource for a learning journey orchestrated by the educator. Thus, in Dewey's democratic pedagogy, valuing the voices of children does not imply that adults and children have equal epistemic rights in educational interactions.

The concept of dialogic pedagogy presented in this article refers to an understanding of dialogue as a form of communication underpinned by equality between participants who are equally positioned as legitimate authors of valid knowledge (Baraldi 2023). Whilst democratic pedagogy remains an important methodological influence for dialogic pedagogy, democratic pedagogy and dialogic pedagogy are not synonymous because they are based on different positions of children and adults vis-à-vis their epistemic rights.

It is important to clarify that dialogic pedagogy is not an univocal discourse, suggesting reference to dialogic *pedagogies*. From the robust tradition of research in dialogic pedagogy, different approaches have emerged. For example, Hofmann, Vrikki and Evagorou (2021) discuss the dialogic methodology of teacher's education. Recent work from Wegerif and Major (2023) explores the impact of technology on the perspectives of dialogic pedagogy. García-Carrión and colleagues consider the social impact of dialogic practices beyond the school setting, as well as the impact of socially contextual variables on the viability of dialogue (García-Carrión et al. 2020). Whilst it is important to acknowledge the array of intellectual avenues opened by research on dialogue, in this article the discussion focuses on the work of Alexander. Beside the space limitations of an article format, this choice is justified by the influence of Alexander's approach to dialogue in the contexts of the authors' research and professional practice. Alexander suggests that the aim of dialogic teaching is to 'distribute the ownership of talk more equitably' (Alexander 2018, 3). The idea of a more equitable distribution of the ownership of talk suggests a more nuanced approach to dialogic pedagogy.

We would argue that the influence of Alexander's approach to dialogic pedagogic relies on its powerful argumentation. However, it also relies on its viability within hierarchical forms of generational order, allowing it to be enacted in classroom-oriented activities with relative ease. Although a tension towards the positioning of children as authors of valid knowledge is evident, it can be argued that Alexander's notion of dialogue can be positioned within the semantic area of democratic pedagogy. Like Dewey's version of democratic pedagogy, Alexander's dialogic pedagogy values the voices of children. Like Dewey's version of democratic pedagogy, however, it does not require that adults and children hold equal epistemic rights in educational interactions, nor does it require the promotion of children's agency.

The facilitation of children's agency in educational contexts relates the viability of agency to the positioning of children as persons who can express their own points of view and can author knowledge. Facilitation may not lend itself to the enactment of Alexander's concept of dialogic pedagogy, because the latter does not fully upgrade children's epistemic rights. Alexander's concept of dialogic pedagogy does not exclude the preservation of hierarchical epistemic generational order where adults and children

participate in communication as standardised roles (teacher and pupil). The position of children vis-à-vis their epistemic rights in educational interactions also discriminates between facilitation and neo-Vygotskian methodologies. This will be discussed in the following section.

A critical comparison between neo-Vygotskian methodologies and facilitation of children's agency

The epistemic positioning of children and adults in scaffolding, and facilitation

Neo-Vygotskian methodologies have influenced educational practices through several incarnations: scaffolding, dialectical pedagogy, dialogic enquiry, sustained shared thinking and 'interthinking'. This section critiques the often-uncontested idea that neo-Vygotskian methodologies can enhance dialogic pedagogy. We argue that neo-Vygotskian methodologies are underpinned by a hierarchical positioning of adults and children, based on unequal epistemic rights. Unequal epistemic rights are essential for the enhancement of neo-Vygotskian methodologies. However, unequal epistemic rights ultimately make neo-Vygotskian methodologies incompatible with dialogic pedagogy.

It is true that neo-Vygotskian methodologies, similar to democratic pedagogy and Alexander's version of dialogic pedagogy, aim to mitigate generationally based hierarchies between adults and children's epistemic rights. Such mitigation, however, may not close the gap between adults and children in terms of epistemic authority and epistemic status.

Due to their influential status in the scholarly and professional debate *on* and *in* education, we focus on the neo-Vygotskian methodologies of *scaffolding* (in the following part of this section), and *sustained shared thinking* (see below).

Scaffolding is a methodology intended to support children's *learning to learn* (Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1976). Scaffolding develops from the Vygotskian idea that education is most effective when adults support children's learning within their *zone of proximal development*, that is, when adults challenge children to move forward incrementally, using notions and experience from established domains of knowledge (Vygotsky 1978). *Scaffolding* is centred around adults' actions supporting children to *learn how to know* (Seedhouse 2004), to *take control of the process to achieving knowledge* (Sharpe 2008, 133). The commitment to support children 'taking control of the process of achieving knowledge' suggests that scaffolding aims to mitigate hierarchical forms of adult-child relationships in educational interactions. However, *mitigation* does not entail the upgrade of children's epistemic rights. Scaffolding promotes children's more active participation, yet scaffolding is epistemologically founded on low epistemic status of children as authors of knowledge. Methodologically, scaffolding is founded on teachers' monitoring of children's learning which includes the evaluation of children's performances, based on pre-determined standards.

More emphasis on the epistemic rights of children is introduced by Fleer's reconceptualisation of scaffolding as collaborative. Collaborative scaffolding emphasises the quality of teacher-child interactions (Fleer 1992), proposing a development of neo-Vygotskian methodologies where children's epistemic rights are upgraded, particularly during the *handover* phase of educational activities, when the teacher progressively allows the child

to take on more of the responsibility for task completion. Nevertheless, it remains possible to observe a difference between collaborative scaffolding and facilitation. Collaborative scaffolding is underpinned by the concept of cognitively orientated, purposeful, socially framed interactions (Fleer 1992), where the teacher utilises a range of techniques to further children's understandings, to establish shared understanding of children's ideas, to frame children's experiences in the learning tasks.

Whilst collaborative scaffolding upgrades children's epistemic rights, such upgrading is not accompanied by a challenge to the hierarchical positioning of adults and children, which remains a staple of 'cognitively orientated, purposeful, socially framed' interactions. The *orientation* of the interaction is designed by the teacher towards *cognitive developmental* goals. The *purpose* of the interaction is given by the achievement of curricular learning objectives. Purposeful and cognitively oriented interactions are *socially framed* as children's experiences are translated into resources for accomplishment of the learning task.

Scaffolding positions children as 'learners' who can become authors of knowledge only if supported by teachers' expert guidance, within the limits imposed by adults' expectations. In the methodology of scaffolding, children's agency is therefore limited because children are subordinated in a hierarchy of epistemic authority and epistemic status.

This marks the epistemological and methodological difference between scaffolding and facilitation. Epistemologically, scaffolding stops at the recognition of 'the importance of *participation* in empowering children *as learners*' (Pascal and Bertram 2009, 254). Facilitation makes the roles of educator and learner more fluid and constructs non-hierarchical generational relationships in educational interactions. Children can be positioned as learners, but they can also exercise agency as authors of knowledge. Methodologically, scaffolding and facilitation share the aim of empowering children's active contribution to their own learning. However, facilitation understands the empowerment of children as learners as intertwined with the empowerment of children as authors of knowledge, upgrading their epistemic rights in educational interactions. Facilitation challenges the epistemic hierarchy between adults and children, inviting adults to refrain from: 1) claiming superior epistemic *authority* to justify the imposition of their ideas and values; 2) claiming superior epistemic *status* to legitimise control over the themes and trajectories of the interactions (Baraldi 2015).

The difference between facilitation and scaffolding is ultimately a difference in the epistemic authority of children. The epistemic authority of children is higher in facilitation because children are recognised as legitimate authors of knowledge (Baraldi 2023). Facilitation aims to change the hierarchical relationships between adults and children through the promotion of expectations of personal expression that should replace expectations of role performances. A change in expectations means that children and adults' actions-in-interaction are understood as expressions of the unique person and not as performances of standardised roles.

Developments in neo-Vygotskian methodologies and the risk of technicalisation of educational interactions

Vygotskian pedagogy has influenced several other methodologies over the last three decades. Amongst the most prominent of these are *dialectical pedagogy* (Bruner 1996;

Nouri and Pihlgren 2018), *dialogic enquiry* (Sanchez and Athanases 2023; Wells 1999), *sustained shared thinking* (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002), *interthinking* (Littleton and Mercer 2013).

Bruner, Wells, Siraj-Blatchford with colleagues, and Littleton with Mercer develop their methodologies emphasising different areas of Vygotsky's theory. Bruner combines scaffolding with Hegel's conversational epistemology giving it a fresh conceptual depth. Wells utilises the concept of semiotic mediation to create a middle-ground between innatism and social pedagogies. Littleton and Mercer open new ground for their Vygotskian approach through a semiotic evolutionary theory that considers thinking as a function of language development. However, *sustained shared thinking* is probably the breakthrough neo-Vygotskian methodology in the socio-cultural context where the authors work as educators and researchers.

Siraj-Blatchford (2009) acknowledges the value of sustained shared thinking does not reside in the theoretical innovation introduced; rather, it is related to the methodological focus on the observation of empirical interactions in educational encounters. As a methodology, sustained shared thinking emphasises 'working together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative' (Siraj-Blatchford 2009, 5). This appears an orthodox Vygotskian perspective, enriched by the emphasis on learning by doing from Dewey's democratic pedagogy.

Sustained shared thinking, as much as scaffolding and the other neo-Vygotskian methodologies discussed in this section, is a remarkable piece of pedagogical work. However, as with other neo-Vygotskian methodologies, it does not challenge the hierarchical positioning of adults and children in educational interactions. Neo-Vygotskian methodologies aim to *mitigate* adult-child hierarchical relationships, similarly to democratic pedagogy, and to Alexander's approach to dialogic pedagogy. Nevertheless, the superior epistemic authority and the superior epistemic status of adults is not challenged. For example, when discussing the status of sustained shared thinking, Siraj-Blatchford presents it as teacher-led pedagogy, 'in the sense that it is something adults do to support and engage children's learning' (Siraj-Blatchford 2009, 11). In the sustained shared thinking methodology, according to Siraj-Blatchford, 'adults progressively introduce [children] to the cultural tools that they require to integrate fully as contributing members of the society around them' (11). The hierarchical distribution of epistemic rights underpinning sustained shared thinking entails a hierarchical positioning of adults and children: adults do *for* children. Adults support children's learning. What remains for children, is to learn *from* adults.

At the level of empirical educational interactions, a possible, and important, risk for neo-Vygotskian methodologies is to evolve into one-way communication, which Bohm (1996) recognises as prodromic of *technicalisation* of communication. This risk is intrinsic to the unequal epistemic rights of adults and children underpinning neo-Vygotskian methodologies. Technicalisation describes an instrumental use of communication to pursue pre-determined agendas that may objectify the other. Technicalisation diverges from Bohm's concept of dialogue, from Freire's (1970) concept of authentic education and from Buber's (2002) concept of I-Thou humanising relationship. Technicalisation prevents reflectivity *in* and *on* action (Schön 1987) and can transform educational interaction into a mechanical style of communication, a series of monologic utterances that produces 'dialogues of non-discovery' (Richards and Pilcher 2015).

The fluid epistemic positioning of teachers and children in facilitation: is it compatible with education?

This section tackles an important question concerning the extent to which facilitation of children's agency is compatible with primary functions of education such as supporting children's learning.

What is characteristic of facilitation is that the positioning of participants in educational interactions is fluid, in line with Bohm's (1996) idea of *authentic dialogue* and *free-flow* communication, where positions can be exchanged (for instance the position of learner and the position of author of knowledge) because communication is oriented by expectations of personal expression. Facilitation of children's agency constructs a non-hierarchical form of generational order in the local social contexts of educational interactions. A non-hierarchical positioning of adults and children makes standardised role expectations unviable, replacing them with expectations of personal expression.

As discussed above, dialogue is a form of communication based on the positive value of active and fair participation, turn-taking, and empowerment of personal expression. In educational contexts, dialogue opens the door to the personalised production of knowledge. Previous research has applied dialogic pedagogy to a diverse range of contexts. Janta and Harte (2016) use dialogic forms of interaction for mentoring, Crul and Schneider (2014) propose dialogic mentoring as support in education, van Herpen et al. (2019) suggest a dialogic approach as the methodological foundation for the work of professional therapists. Fitzgerald et al. (2010) suggest that the facilitation of children's agency creates the social conditions for dialogic pedagogies that can: (1) foster children's motivation and resilience, (2) provide personalised learning support for them, (3) develop children's participative approach to learning.

Janta and Harte indicate the quality of teaching as 'the most important school-level factor influencing student outcomes' (2016, 24), highlighting that expectations and attitudes framing educational interaction can have an important impact on children's experiences. Following on from this, facilitation of children's agency can be instrumental to a new approach to curricular objectives because upgrading children's epistemic rights can support both teachers and children to make substantial and significant contributions to learning, creating favourable conditions for children's thinking to move forward creatively (Crul and Schneider 2014; Koehler 2025; Nouwen, Clycq and Ulican 2015). Thus, facilitation supports curricular learning, as upgrading children's epistemic authority does not imply downgrading teachers' epistemic authority: a teacher can invest their epistemic authority to author knowledge in form of curricular teaching. This claim is reinforced, with an eye to practices, by research from SIRIUS, a Network on Migrant Education co-funded by the European Union (Essomba 2014; Nouwen et al. 2015). Based on the observation of a positive relationship between the facilitation of children's agency and educational achievement, the series of SIRIUS briefs supports the use of facilitation of children's agency in educational settings. Further evidence of the positive impact of facilitation on children's agency in curricular provision is offered by large international projects such as EU-funded projects PERAE (2016–2018, see Koehler 2025), Erasmus+ 'Shared Memories for Mediation and Dialogue' (SHARMED, 2016–2018, see Baraldi, Joslyn, and Farini 2021) and Horizon2020 'Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation' (CHILD-UP, 2020–2023, see

Baraldi 2023). The results of these projects suggest that the facilitation of children's agency can support oral communication and writing skills, and improve curricular outcomes in different areas of teaching and learning including Art, History, Geography, Intercultural Education. Facilitation of children's agency, for example in the context of artistic workshops (Amadasi and Iervese 2018), has proved capable of promoting creative reflections on global history and geography, supporting children's expression of personal and cultural memories.

Notes on the structural limitations of facilitation: the organisational and cultural variables

In this section, we offer some thoughts on the structural limitations to facilitation (and, incidentally, to all learner-centred methodologies). Picturing a univocal relationship between the use of facilitation, the construction of dialogic pedagogy and the promotion of children's agency by upgrading their epistemic rights in educational interaction would overlook the impact of the organisational and cultural contexts of education. Thus, this section aims to briefly introduce a critical acknowledgement of how organisational and cultural contexts can influence the viability of facilitation. Regarding the *organisational* context, Lefstein (2010) invites reflection on the tensions inherent in dialogic pedagogy vis-à-vis the central features of the school setting, in particular, class size, the curriculum and institutional roles, drawing attention to the implications and challenges they pose for dialogue.

Rather than 'eliminating the teacher', Lefstein invites us to consider the complexity of the role of the teacher. Positioning children as active contributors to knowledge, giving their voices a hearing alongside those of the official curriculum, requires that teachers establish and maintain communicative norms. Examples include encouraging and facilitating reflexivity, opening the curriculum by exhibiting an open epistemological stance, maintaining conversational cohesion by relating pupils' contributions to one another, drawing together and summarising conversational threads, and making explicit the logic of the developing arguments.

As Lefstein notes, some of these functions contradict one another as dialogic tensions are manifested in the teaching role. For instance, opening-up curricular content and maintaining conversational coherence may involve denying pupils the floor. Similarly, protecting pupils' personal and cultural identities may involve not probing their thinking (in public). Affording 'wait time' for pupils to think and prepare ideas can detract from conversational flow and coherence. Lefstein's remarks invite a realistic outlook on the viability of dialogic pedagogy in the context of the school setting. Such realism is shared by recent literature on facilitation that interprets dialogue as the positioning of children as authors of knowledge, acknowledging that facilitation of children's participation may take different forms, based on the fluid interaction between dialogic actions and the classroom setting (Baraldi, Farini, and Ślusarczyk 2022). These works converge with Lefstein in highlighting the importance of approaching reflectively the local settings and established practices where facilitation aims to upgrade children's rights and responsibilities in the interactional construction of knowledge.

Reflecting on the *cultural* context of educational practices, Tobin, Yeh, and Karasawa (2009) suggest a cautious approach to the global application of

pedagogical innovation, including innovation motivated by the objective of promoting children's agency. Educational institutions are looked to as key sites for preserving core cultural beliefs that reflect teachers' shared beliefs and practices. Shared beliefs and practices are often implicit because, for the most part, they are not directly taught or learned in schools of education, written down in textbooks, or mandated in policy documents. For example, Schweisfurth (2019) invites reflection on the viability of agency in non-western countries. According to Schweisfurth, in many African cultures, respect for elders is ingrained. In such contexts where children do not question adults or the texts they have written, authorship of knowledge in educational settings does not come easily. Some critical studies suggest the very concept of children's agency is as a Western import and a form of neo-colonialism (Schweisfurth 2013). Thus, changing classroom practice in learner-centred directions is not just a case of modifying teaching techniques, but also cultural beliefs and practices.

Facilitation may therefore not be compatible with education cultures underpinning practices in non-western contexts. Additionally, Schweisfurth signals that the risk of colonialism intrinsic to a culturally blind application of learner-centred pedagogies applies also to work with disadvantaged children in western settings. For this reason, it may be useful to consider recent work (Baraldi, Farini, and Ślusarczyk 2022) reporting the success of moderate forms of facilitation in culturally diverse settings, where a mitigated form of hierarchical epistemic authority is maintained as essential to the viability of educational relationships. In these circumstances, moderate forms of facilitation border Fleer's conceptualisation of collaborative scaffolding, with a difference consisting in teachers' less stringent control over the development of the interaction towards a curriculum-driven agenda.

Conclusion. Facilitation for dialogic pedagogy: its ambition, and its challenges

Even in situations characterised by the combination of an organisational context which is conducive to the use of facilitation and a cultural context which is favourable to the promotion of children's agency, an exercise in realism is necessary. The most creative form of facilitation in the most receptive context cannot guarantee the enhancement of dialogic pedagogy. This is due to the ontological status of dialogic pedagogy as co-constructed by adults and children. If children are positioned as agents who can make decisions, for instance decisions that concern their participation, facilitation cannot be imagined as a tool to be used on children to achieve the outcome of generating dialogue. Dialogic pedagogy is not the automatic outcome of a well-planned technical procedure.

For instance, the facilitation of children's agency is put to the test when agency is expressed as the choice to refrain from active engagement in the interaction. A challenge for all methodologies aiming to promote children's participation in educational interaction, already acknowledged in the pioneering work of Gordon (1974), consists in situation when children choose not to participate. It is the same problem experienced by Roger's client-centred therapy (Rogers 1951), the inspiration of Gordon's pedagogy: promoting active engagement can find an apparently insurmountable obstacle when the participants do not want to actively engage in the interaction.

Research in educational settings has explored an array of reasons of self-marginalisation: challenges to oral production in the host language (Herrlitz and Maier 2005), challenges to understanding the school's prevailing cultural orientations (Burger 2013; Harris and Kaur 2012), disabilities (Anaby et al. 2013), disadvantaged socio-economic status (Aturupane, Glewwe, and Wisniewski 2013). Nevertheless, it can be argued that a commitment to understand the genesis of a social problem such as self-marginalisation in educational interaction does not remove the need to consider its impact, and to be prepared to manage it.

Facilitation of children's agency is ethically and methodologically underpinned by the premise that children's active participation cannot be the pressurised by adults' intentions. In the light of the meaning of agency that we have embraced (above), a forced participation is not an agentic participation.

The ability to promote active engagement without forcing participation is an existential challenge, and a potential limit, to facilitation. This is probably more acute than in the case of neo-Vygotskian methodologies, or democratic pedagogy. Neo-Vygotskian methodologies and democratic pedagogy are less affected by the paradox of forced participation, because they maintain hierarchical forms of positioning between adults and children, which is consubstantial to the pursue of educational agendas. On the contrary, facilitation of children's agency is only viable when hierarchical general order is replaced by equal epistemic rights. For this reason, facilitation of children's agency is particularly exposed to the risk of forced active participation, which would contradict its ontological foundations.

A paradox may therefore emerge if respecting children's self-determination by not forcing their active participation entails the risk of contributing to self-marginalisation. Nevertheless, as suggested by pragmatist philosophy, paradoxes are managed in social practices like Gordian knots that refuse to be untangled: a decision is made that dissolves the paradox by choosing one side of it. For example, Gordon chooses to prioritise the promotion of active participation at the cost of hindering self-determination, accepting the risk to transform active participation in role performance imposed on children (Gordon 1974). Laissez-faire methodologies, take an opposite approach, choosing to prioritise self-determination (Mintz 2003). Laissez-faire methodologies accept the risk of validating emerging patterns of marginalisation, when children opt for self-exclusion from educational interactions.

Research in facilitation has reflected on the paradoxical coupling of the ethical commitment to prioritise children's self-determination (including the choice of refraining from participation) and the methodological risk of supporting self-marginalisation (Baraldi, Joslyn, and Farini 2021). A proposed solution to the dilemma of participation in facilitation, consists in a mid-range approach in the continuum from putting pressure on children to laissez-faire. While facilitation cannot neutralise the risk of self-marginalisation among some children, research has suggested that a combination of laissez faire techniques, low-intensity Gordonian techniques and role-modelling can be successful in supporting active participation without hindering self-determination (Baraldi 2023; Warming 2012).

Facilitation cannot neutralise the risk of self-marginalisation. This represents a possible limitation to its capacity to promote children's agency, true for all forms of educational communication that distance themselves from adult-centred

frameworks. This risk must be acknowledged. On the other hand, however, it can be argued that participation in educational interactions secured by adult-centred models is the participation of roles, not the participation of persons. It is a participation that does not fulfil the mandate of the UNCRC regarding the promotion of children's right to self-determination.

The limitations and risks of facilitation of children's agency have been acknowledged organisationally, culturally and methodologically. Nevertheless, this article can rely on a thorough consideration of pedagogical and sociological research to suggest that facilitation demonstrates both practical potential and adequate conceptual solidity as a methodology to construct the social conditions for dialogic pedagogy. Underpinned by a vision of children as owners of high epistemic authority and epistemic status, facilitation positions them as authors of valid and valued knowledge, thus nourishing each child's talents (Baraldi, Farini, and Ślusarczyk 2022; Farini and Scollan 2023). By upgrading children epistemic rights in educational interactions, facilitation makes relevant expectations of children's personal expression, potentially transforming of the macro-structures of intergenerational order (Alanen 2009; Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig 2005; Baraldi and Corsi 2017). Such an ambitious view of the transformative potential of facilitation is supported by theories of change that connect diffused innovation at the micro-level of interactions to the gradual evolution of social structures at the macro-level (Luhmann 2005; Needham and Ülküer 2020; Tisdall and Davis 2015). Interaction after interaction, local change after local change, it is possible to change generationing practices in education.

This article has proposed a theoretical discussion to produce a concept of facilitation of children's agency solid enough to underpin methodological research and practice devoted to enhancing dialogic pedagogy. We are currently building a large body of recorded education activities where facilitation is utilised as a methodology to promote dialogic pedagogy, in the context of international research projects. An analysis of the data is being undertaken to identify further potentiality and limitations among a wide range of facilitative actions-in-interaction, against the aim of combining the promotion of children's agency and the achievement of curricular learning.

For the time being, it is hoped that the present article can contribute to the debate around the facilitation of children's agency, and the relationship between facilitation and dialogic teaching, as well as around the authors' critical stance towards mainstream pedagogical methodologies that are often uncritically considered as viable options to promote dialogic pedagogy. We believe that such debate may help us reflect on our own research and practice. Most importantly, we believe that a lively conceptual discussion is necessary to the practice of dialogic pedagogy in a changing, complex society.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

ORCID

Federico Farini  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8498-0453>

Angela Scollan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9005-5838>

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