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Facilitation of children's agency as dialogic education: examples from practice and reflection on practice, including a critical comparison with neo-vygotskian methodologies

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ABSTRACT

Based on a thorough consideration of the pedagogical and sociological literature, combined with the authors' reflection on their own pedagogical practice, this article discusses the circular relationships between facilitation of children's agency and dialogue in educational contexts. The first section of the article responds to the question: 'What are we talking about?', 'What do we mean by facilitation?' The second section compares facilitation and neo-vygotskian pedagogies, arguing that the former is more apt to sustain dialogic pedagogical practices. The third section discusses real examples of the use of facilitation, taken from pedagogical research undertaken by the authors in English primary schools. The examples presented in the second part of the article show the translation of facilitation from methodology to practice, focusing on an important facilitative action: minimal feedback. In its final section, the article argues that facilitation can position children as authors of valid knowledge, as they author narratives that share experiences and emotions. Facilitation is discussed as a form of dialogical communication, and a methodology to secure the sustainability of dialogic pedagogical practice. The article concludes by proposing facilitation as a methodology that can fulfill the ambition to transform educational interactions into social contexts where dialogical pedagogy can flourish.

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What are we talking about: the ambition of the article and a definition of facilitation

Supported by a thorough review of the pedagogical and sociological literature, combined with the authors' reflection on their own pedagogical practice, this article suggests that the facilitation of children's agency can sustain dialogic pedagogical practice. The ambition of the article is to promote a synergy between theory and practice, where knowledge in teaching is developed and used to promote innovative practice (Dickerson *et al.* 2022).

An initial question concerns the meaning of dialogical pedagogical practice. What is dialogical? What is dialogue? 'Dialogue' is understood as a specific form of

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communication, rather than a synonym for communicative exchanges (Baraldi 2014a, 2014b, Baraldi and Iervese 2017, Baraldi *et al.* 2022, Baraldi 2023 Farini *et al.* 2023). In fact, essential conditions for a communicative exchange to be dialogical are here identified: communication (whether face-to-face, mediated by digital technology or asynchronous) is dialogical when characterised by action-in-interaction that express equity, empathy and empowerment (Bamberg 2011, Baraldi 2014a, Clark 2020). Thus, pedagogical practice is dialogical where action-in-(educational) interactions display fair distribution of active participation in interactions (equity); expressions of sensitivity to interlocutors' interests and/or needs (empathy); the treatment of disagreements and alternative perspectives as enrichments in communication (empowerment).

Actions that express equity, empathy and empowerment characterise social situations where participants, for example educators and children, are positioned as agents. The agency is concerned with how participants in communication *respond, mitigate, resist, have views about and interact with their social conditions in which they find themselves* (Moosa Miltha 2005, p. 380). This definition introduces three dimensions of agency: 1) action, 2) perspectives, and 3) interaction with the social context. *Action* refers to autonomous choices, linking agency to self-determination. *Perspectives* refer to valuing participants' voices; therefore, it links with active listening. *Interaction with the social context* refers to choices that influence how all participants act, and re-act, in the social situation.

When referred to as children, agency is a debated concept, as suggested by the recent literature that presents concurring definitions (Oswell 2013, Stoecklin and Fattore 2017, Farini and Scollan 2019, Larkins 2019). However, a critical review of the literature allows for identifying a baseline: children's agency describes social encounters where all participants understand children's actions as based on the availability of choices that exceeds a mere reaction to adults' inputs. Availability of choices introduces the possibility of alternative courses of action, thus generating complexity and enhancing change in children's personal trajectories of lived experience (Amadasi and Iervese 2018) as well as in the social contexts (Baraldi 2014b) of children's experiences. In educational contexts, agency may refer to choices that underpin rights and responsibilities to access and produce knowledge (Podesta and Hoath 2020). Rights and responsibilities to access and produce knowledge are also defined in the literature as *epistemic authority* (Heritage and Raymond 2005, Baraldi *et al.* 2021).

Structural constraints can influence the nature of individual participation, therefore the conditions of agency. This is particularly true for children in educational contexts. In educational contexts, particularly in school education, children are positioned in a hierarchical generational order, where teachers hold higher epistemic authority (Baraldi 2021). Research on teacher–children interactions have discussed forms of communication that promise to mitigate hierarchical epistemic authority. This is the case for scaffolding (Sharpe 2008) or revoicing (O'Connor and Michaels 1996). However, it is apparent that the several attempts to mitigate hierarchical epistemic authority in education are caught in a paradox. The mitigation of hierarchical epistemic authority depends on adults' mitigating initiatives; therefore, it can mitigate, but does not question, the hierarchical positioning of adults and children with regard to the rights to access and produce knowledge.

Facilitation of children's agency (hence forth: *facilitation*) is a form of communication characterised by an array of actions that can promote equity, empathy and empowerment, therefore the conditions for the establishment of dialogue (Baraldi *et al.* 2021, 2022, Farini and Scollan 2021, Farini *et al.* 2023). Facilitation happens in interactions, where adults' actions that support children's agency are intertwined with children's actions that display agency. This article argues that facilitation lends itself as a viable methodology to enhance dialogic pedagogy.

In educational contexts, facilitation positions both educators and learners as holders of rights and responsibilities for constructing knowledge, promoting equal epistemic authority of all participants in educational interactions. This is particularly poignant in contexts where educational relationships intersect inter-generational relationships as in most school settings, including the primary education settings where the authors of the article have extensively worked and research.

Acknowledgement of children's equal epistemic authority intrinsically positions them as legitimate producers of knowledge (Baraldi 2015). Facilitation is indeed underpinned by the vision of children as autonomous authors of knowledge (Baraldi *et al.* 2021, Scollan and Farini 2021; Baraldi *et al.* 2022, Farini *et al.* 2023). By upgrading children's epistemic authority in interactions, facilitation promotes expectations of children's agency, thus contributing to the transformation of the macro-structures of intergenerational order (Alanen 2009, Baraldi 2012, Baraldi and Corsi 2017). This ambitious view of the transformative potential of facilitation, and therefore of interaction, is supported by recent theories of social change that link diffused innovation at the micro-level of interactions to gradual evolution at the macro-level, interaction after interaction, local change after local change (Tisdall and Davis 2015, Needham and Ülküer 2020).

Facilitation can be seen as a methodology to produce the conditions for dialogic teaching, based on actions that systematically position both adults and children as authors of valid knowledge. Dialogic teaching based on the methodology of facilitation is therefore a form of teaching that upgrades children's epistemic authority. In dialogic teaching, equity, empathy and expectations of personal expression replace expectations of role performance (Baraldi and Iervese 2014).

A critical comparison between facilitation and neo-vygotskian methodologies

This section discusses similarities and differences between facilitation and the most widely discussed neo-vygotskian methodologies. Neo-vygotskian methodologies have been influential on educational practices in several incarnations. Among the most influential, it is possible to list dialectical pedagogy, dialogic enquiry, scaffolding, sustained shared thinking and interthinking. In this section, the comparison takes a critical approach towards the too often uncontested idea that neo-vygotskian methodologies can promote dialogic pedagogy. The authors argue that neo-vygotskian methodologies are still underpinned by the hierarchical positioning of adults and children, based on unequal epistemic rights, which makes them incompatible with dialogic pedagogy. It is true that neo-vygotskian methodologies aim to mitigate the ordinary hierarchy in epistemic authority that structures educational communication; however, such mitigation may reduce, but does not close, the gap

between adults and children in terms of epistemic authority. Because of their status in scholarly and professional debates *on* and *in* education, attention is particularly focused on the neo-vygotskian methodologies of *scaffolding*, *interthinking* and *sustained shared thinking*.

Wood and colleagues first adopted the *scaffolding* metaphor to explain the role that adults can play in joint problem-solving activities with children, providing temporary support for the completion of a task that learners otherwise might not be able to complete. Scaffolding is a methodology for adults, as educators, to support children's *learning to learn* (Wood *et al.* 1976). This support can be provided in a variety of manners that, for example, includes modelling and the posing of questions for different subjects at different ages. From its introduction, Wood's methodology was associated with the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (Cazden 1979), particularly with the concept of Zone of Proximal Development that describes 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky 1978, p. 86). 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, little by little, using notions and experience from established domains of knowledge (Vygotsky 1978). Scaffolding is therefore centred around adults' actions that are devoted to support children to *learn how to know* (Seedhouse 2004), to *take control of the process to achieving knowledge* (Sharpe 2008, p. 133). Thus, while scaffolding aims to mitigate hierarchical forms of adult–child relationships in educational interactions, such mitigation is not related to re-positioning children as authors of valid and legitimate knowledge. It is surely true that scaffolding promotes a more active participation of children to learning; nevertheless, it is methodologically founded on teachers' monitoring of children's learning that includes evaluation of children's performances, based on pre-determined standards. Facilitation differs from scaffolding. Like scaffolding, facilitation empowers children as learners; unlike scaffolding, however, facilitation also promotes the access of children to the status of authors of knowledge. Whilst scaffolding stops at the recognition of *the importance of participation in empowering children as learners* (Pascal and Bertram 2009, p. 254), in facilitation the roles of educators and learners become more fluid, as non-hierarchical inter-generational relationships are constructed in interaction.

The difference between facilitation and scaffolding is chiefly 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. The epistemic authority of children is lower in scaffolding, where children are positioned 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 to adults in a hierarchy between unequal epistemic authorities. The implications of a hierarchical distribution of epistemic authority have been discussed by some prominent scholars and practitioners of methodologies derived from scaffolding. Puntambekar and Hübscher (2005) contend that 'the scaffolding construct is increasingly being used synonymously with support (p. 1)'. Stone (1998) argues that too often the scaffolding metaphor has been

removed from its original theoretical context and that this has led to the use of scaffolding as a teacher-initiated and teacher-centred directive instructional strategy.

It is argued here that the risk for scaffolding of morphing into teacher-centred pedagogical practices is not only related to an erroneous application of theory into practice. The risk for scaffolding to become a *directive instructional strategy* is related to the misunderstanding of key-concepts in cases where practice is not underpinned by a genuine adhesion to Vygotsky's theoretical framework. It is our belief that, similarly to other neo-vygotskian methodologies, the risk for scaffolding to drift towards teacher-centred practices is intrinsic to the position of children as subordinated to adults in a hierarchy between unequal epistemic authorities, a hierarchy which is, on the other hand, essential for the methodology of scaffolding, for teachers to lead and orient the trajectory of interactions.

Different from neo-vygotskian methodologies, facilitation challenges the epistemic-based hierarchy between adults and children (Baraldi 2015; Scollan and Farini, 2021). Facilitation aligns with the discourse on, and with, children fuelled by the Reggio Approach to pedagogy. The Reggio Approach positions children, in a similar fashion to facilitation, as autonomous and competent authors of knowledge (Edwards *et al.* 1998). Like the Reggio Approach, facilitation invites adults to refrain from: 1) claiming superior epistemic *authority* to justify the imposition of their ideas and values when interacting with children; 2) claiming superior epistemic *status* to legitimise control over the themes and trajectories of the interactions.

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. Such shift in the expectations that structure communication means that children and adults' actions-in-interaction are understood as expressions of a unique person and not as performances of a standardised role. As suggested by Farini (2019), when dialogue is built through the practice of facilitation, the pupil (the standardised role) leaves room for the child (the unique person) as a reference for educational communication. Facilitation promotes equality in participation among participants who are constructed in communication as unique persons. This is not the case for scaffolding, where personal expressions are accepted as far as they do not cause obstacles in the trajectory of the educational agenda.

In addition to scaffolding, the vygotskian pedagogical theory has influenced other methodologies over the last three decades, amongst the most prominent *dialectical pedagogy* (Bruner 1996), *dialogic enquiry* (Wells 1999), *interthinking* (Mercer 2000, Littleton and Mercer 2013) and *sustained shared thinking* (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002, Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2008). 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 uses the concept of semiotic mediation to create a middle ground between innatism and social pedagogies. Mercer and Littleton found new ground for their vygotskian methodology in a semiotic evolutionary theory that considers thinking as a function of language development. In the first two decades of the 21st century, interthinking and sustained shared thinking have been the most widely practiced and discussed neo-vygotskyian methodologies (Teo 2019, Taar 2022). The next

section will critically discuss interthinking and sustain shared thinking regarding the position of children and adults vis-à-vis their epistemic authority, which is considered a key determinant for the expression of agency (Baraldi 2015, Richards and Pilcher 2015, Baraldi and Iervese 2017, Farini and Scollan 2023).

Influenced by Barnes' concept of exploratory talk (Barnes 1975), as much as by Vygotsky's idea that that collaboration with others was a source of cognitive development (Pantaleo 2007), *interthinking* identifies interaction as the social context where talk can be utilised to think collectively, to engage with others' ideas through oral language (Vass *et al.* 2014), using language to think collectively, make sense of experiences, solve problems, as well as engage with others' ideas through oral language (Mercer 2004, Pantaleo 2007). Thus, knowledge is not only jointly constructed but also distributed with the help of interthinking (Vass *et al.* 2014).

In recent years, interthinking has proposed itself as a viable pedagogical methodology to promote '21st century skills', that is, the skills that could help students navigate and thrive in today's world (Teo 2019): interthinking should help students learn and think together, practicing critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration, which are essential to solve real-world problems as productive citizens in contemporary times (Taar 2022).

However, critical reflection is invited with regard to the shift that occurs in the literature promoting interthinking, when epistemological considerations about the nature of learning are translated into methodological discussions about the way to promote learning. As interthinking is applied methodologically, it becomes possible to observe that children are firmly positioned in a subordinated position to adults, within a hierarchy between unequal epistemic authorities. For example, Mercer invites teacher to '*help* learners develop ways of using language as a social mode of thinking' (Mercer 1995, p. 61), therefore constructing learners as a position of epistemic deficit, until teaching will enable them to learn how to learn through language. For Mercer, an essential component of interthinking is teachers' commitment to modelling and teaching appropriate oral language behaviours, as students are 'apprentices in collective thinking, under the expert guidance of their teacher' (Mercer 2000, p. 161). 'Expert guidance', as much as students' status of 'apprentices in collective thinking' introduce semantics of educational interactions as a social space structured by hierarchical epistemic authority, which legitimises teachers' role as guidance for the benefit of students as apprentices of thinking. Regarding the object of teachers' expert guidance, that is, dialogue, it can be observed that interthinking methodologies ultimately conceptualise dialogue as an educational outcome, as a learning objective. The interaction between teachers and children is driven by the achievement of a learning objective, learning how do 'dialoguing for learning'; therefore, it is intrinsically structured around role performances that enable observation and evaluation of learning. A critical review of its methodological foundation invites us to consider that application of interthinking necessarily relies on the superior epistemic authority of the teacher, which legitimises teacher's control over the trajectory of interaction. The superior epistemic authority of the teacher becomes a necessary resource that helps students acquiring the skills and knowledge that they need to learn how to utilise dialogue as an instrument of learning.

Sustained shared thinking is the breakthrough neo-vygotskian methodology for educational practice in the national context where the authors work as educators

and researchers. Regarding education of young children, sustained shared thinking is advocated as the pedagogical methodology of choice in education curricula in England (Department for Education 2014, 2017, 2024), Scotland (Education Scotland 2020), Wales (Welsh Government 2019) and Ireland (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education 2019). The value of sustained shared thinking does not reside in the theoretical innovation introduced, as indirectly but clearly acknowledged by Siraj-Blatchford (2009). Its innovative aspect is related to its attention to 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, p. 5). As claimed by its main scholars, sustained shared thinking embraces an orthodox vygotskian perspective, enriched and updated with an accent on learning by doing and child-initiated pedagogies. Sustained shared thinking, as well as scaffolding, interthinking and all the other methodologies discussed in this section, is a remarkable piece of pedagogical work. However, it must be observed that sustained shared thinking, like the other neo-vygotskian methodologies, does not challenge the hierarchical positioning of adults and children in educational interactions.

Neo-vygotskian methodologies aim to mitigate adult–child hierarchical relationships. Nevertheless, it is here argued that they are ultimately based on such hierarchical positioning when theory is transformed into methodological practices. For example, when discussing the ontological status of sustained shared thinking, Siraj-Blatchford describes it as teacher-led pedagogy, *in the sense that it is something adults do to support and engage children's learning* (Siraj-Blatchford 2009, p. 11). Utilising 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* (ibid.) 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.

The idea of *introducing children to cultural tools*, in particular regarding language, defined by Wells 'the ubiquitous semiotic mediator' (Wells 1999) is not alien to facilitation. Facilitation promotes dialogue by positioning children as authors of knowledge in empirical interaction, which entails a pragmatic engagement with language. However, the hierarchical distribution of rights and responsibility to produce knowledge between children and adults make neo-vygotskian methodologies prone to evolve, at the level of empirical educational interactions, into one-way communication processes, which is indicated by Bohm (1996) as prodromic of *technicalisation* of communication. Technicalisation refers to the instrumental use of communication to pursue predetermined agendas that objectify the partners in interaction. Thus, technicalisation is not only the opposite of Bohm's concept of dialogue, but it is also the opposite of Freire's concept of authentic education (Freire 1970) and Buber's concept of I-Thou humanising relationship (Buber 2002). Technicalisation prevents reflectivity *in* and *on* action, and can transform educational interaction into a series of monologic utterances that produces 'dialogues of non-discovery' (Richards and Pilcher 2015), or dialogue as a learning tool to be learned under the guidance of teachers as the masters of trade.

From facilitation as methodology to facilitation as practice: discussing examples of dialogical pedagogical practice with a focus on actions of minimal feedback

This section discusses an example from the practice of facilitation, extracted from the authors' own work in primary schools. The aim of the discussion is to offer an opportunity to appreciate the movement of facilitation from methodology to method, from theory to practice. The movement from theory to practice has been previously identified as the phase where neo-vygotskian methodologies introduce a hierarchy between unequal epistemic authority, which is essential for teachers to control the trajectory of the interactions in a way that makes them conducive for cooperative learning. The example presented in this section shows how facilitation can sustain dialogue in pedagogical activities by constructing local social contexts where children are positioned as authors of valid knowledge with equal epistemic authority, for instance, as authors of narratives to share perspectives, experiences, and emotions.

The production and exchange of narratives is a context where children can access the status of authors of knowledge. Narratives are at once dialogical and an interactive social context that favours the development of dialogue. Narratives are constructed through dialogue and can construct dialogue.

The production of knowledge in the form of narratives is an example of Max Weber's *Verstehen* (Weber 1947, Tucker 1965). Verstehen refers to individuals making sense of reality by reflecting on their experiences; narratives can be understood as social constructs where experiences are interpreted and storied into trajectories that define and explain personal identities, for the self and others (Giddens 1991). Facilitation is interested in fulfiling the potential of narratives as interactive spaces of polyphony, following Bakhtin's suggestion that when narratives are shared, they can become a chorus voicing different perspectives, where different experiences are combined and storied (Bakhtin 1984), creating localised cultural objects (Holliday and Amadasi 2020).

This article is primarily interested in the negotiation of the rights to author knowledge associated with narrating, because constructing knowledge is considered expression of agency Baraldi and Iervese (2017); Baraldi *et al.* (2021); Farini and Scollan (2023). The construction of narratives, even when narratives are used to construct personal identities, always implies the management of the rights of narrating. As suggested by classic work from Goffman (1974), rights of narrating concern the role taken by participants, such as the role of teller, the role of co-teller, the role of listener or the role of elicitor of new narratives. Rights of narrating also concern the reaction from different participants because each narrative has the potential to be followed by comments, feedback and response narratives that ratify, or challenge, the status and the role of the teller. If recognised, rights of narrating are the recognition of children's roles as co-constructors of knowledge, meaning-makers and experts (Hill 2005). Rights of narrating are rights to access and construct knowledge.

Examples of pedagogical practices, where facilitation is used to promote children's construction of knowledge in classroom interactions, are discussed in this section. The examples consist of fully transcribed recordings of classroom interactions where facilitation was used to upgrade children's epistemic authority. The interactions are taken from a project of pedagogical innovation designed by the authors of this article.

Workshops with children in two primary schools in the city of London (year 3 of the English school system, 7–8 years of age) were designed by the authors to offer children an opportunity to narrate memories encrypted in photographs chosen, and sometimes taken, by them. The underpinning idea, supported by recent international research (Baraldi *et al.* 2021), was that the use of facilitation can promote dialogic pedagogy by positioning children as authors of knowledge, supporting: 1) a participative approach to learning based on equity of opportunities; 2) empathic reflections on the background of personal memories and 3) empowerment of personal expressions rather than role performances.

Whilst several studies have explored the intersection between children's choices as expression of agency and the social context of education theoretically (Lansdown 2005; Dahlberg and Moss 2005, Markström and Halldén 2009, Pascal and Bertram 2009, Bath 2013, White 2016), only a small number of works have explored *how* the intersection between children's choices and the social context materialises in empirical educational interactions (Dotson *et al.* 2014, Baraldi 2015, Farini and Scollan 2023). The examples discussed in this article, extracted by an ongoing research on the use of facilitation in primary schools, indicate the pedagogical opportunities offered by facilitation that are empirically observed in the interlacement between children's and educators' actions. In the discussion of the examples, facilitative actions will be examined regarding their contribution to the enhancement of dialogic pedagogy. If successful, facilitation can become a Bakhtinian centrifugal force, transforming education into a space of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981) that offers spaces for non-hierarchical sharing of knowledge and experiences: a place for real listening. Facilitation may be empirically observed in interactions. The analytical focus on empirical interactions allows for observing *how* facilitative actions can create local contexts where expectations concern equal rights of narrating.

Research on the use of facilitation in educational and non-educational, contexts (Baraldi and Farini 2011, Baraldi and Iervese 2017, Farini 2019, Baraldi et al. 2021, 2022, Farini and Scollan 2021, Farini *et al.* 2023) discuss an array of facilitative actions. In this article, the attention is focused on the most ubiquitous facilitative action observed by the authors in their professional practice: *actions of minimal feedback* on children's actions that are utilised to display active listening (Caffi 2004, Hutchby 2008, House 2013, Huq and Amir 2015).

Actions of minimal feedback include actions such as continuers, acknowledgement tokens and repetitions that can support children's authorship of narratives, with a minimal intervention from the facilitator. *Minimal feedback* describes a category of actions that are common in all types of conversations, including educational interactions (House 2013, Huq and Amir 2015). It is necessary to clarify that minimal feedback does not refer to short replies to explicit questions. Minimal feedback refers to reactions to previous turns at talk, for instance, facilitator's reaction to children's actions and vice-versa. Minimal feedback was considered a valuable resource to support children's authorship of narratives as well as a contextualisation cue for the positioning of participants.

Actions of minimal feedback refer to the facilitator's reactions to children's turns at talk. The facilitator's feedback on children's actions is a crucial aspect of facilitation. Looking at the interlacement of actions-in-interactions in empirical facilitation, the facilitator's actions of minimal feedback are often utilised by children to observe whether

the facilitator positions them as participants with equal epistemic authority or subordinated in a hierarchical order. Actions of minimal feedback are cues for how participants contextualise the interaction, including how participants create a context of dialogue or a context of hierarchical, adult-controlled and communication.

The first consideration invited by the observation of facilitative practice is that minimal feedback can be used to support children's access to the role of authors of knowledge and to connotate positively children's contributions. The support of children's authorship of narratives can be performed with the use of actions of minimal feedback such as *continuers* or *repetitions*. Continuers and repetitions display *active listening* of children's contributions.

Continuers are short actions of feedback that express attention in the current speaker's contribution. Continuers include actions such as short confirmations and para-verbal signals. In the context of facilitation, continuers that express attention can be utilised to reinforce children's status as authors of knowledge and to encourage risk-taking towards the production of knowledge in interaction.

Repetitions are duplication of the previous turn at talk or, more frequently, the duplication of single words or part of sentences from the previous turn at talk (Wong 2000). Repetitions display active listening more explicitly than continuers; however, they entail a more incisive intervention of the facilitator in the interaction.

Another function of minimal feedback that can be observed from the analysis of facilitative practice is to express a positive reaction to children's contribution; this function can be accomplished, as in the examples presented, with the use of *acknowledgement tokens*. Acknowledgement tokens are actions that display understanding of the previous turn at talk while conveying interest, surprise and empathy (McCarthy 2003). Acknowledgement tokens provide more explicit feedback than continuers and repetitions; compared to repetitions, acknowledgement tokens convey a stronger positive connotation of the previous turn at talk.

The exemplary excerpts discussed in this section illustrate the use of minimal actions of feedback. In the practice of facilitation, as in any type of interaction, minimal actions of feedback are inserted into complex sequences of turns at talk, where diverse types of actions are combined, sometimes in the same turn at talk. In these excerpts, minimal actions of feedback are thus presented in their sequential context, as components of complex turns at talk, rather than artificially removed from them to be presented in isolation. This choice is due to the intention to show how minimal actions of feedback worked in the reality of educational practice.

Excerpt 1

Participants	FACilitator, FRIZAN (f, 7, MB)
Setting	School2, pm session
Length of the workshop	45′
Length of the excerpt	2′ (min 9 to 11 in the workshop)
Local context:	FAC has initiated a conversation on the preservation of past events using different supports. FRIZAN refers to home videos

(1) FRIZAN: I watch videos of me when I was a baby (.) mum and dad laugh at me falling over because I couldn't walk then (.) and they laughed at me splashing in the bath (.) we watch videos of all of us and on Saturdays we all get in bed with mummy and snuggle up to watch TV or family videos (.) last time we laughed a lot when I stuffed cake into my mouth when I was just one at a party and emm my cousin was there and her mum (.) and my nanna is in the video but she doesn't live anymore (.) only in the video
(2) FAC: ah ah
(3) FRIZAN: then my mum cries when she sees nanna on the video sometimes and we cuddle up cosies and laugh again at us all (.) I love looking at my baby videos to see how I looked
(4) FAC: aww
(5) FRIZAN: I don't cry because I can still see nanna on the TV and in pictures
(6) FAC: oh, it's so nice to share our special memories and they can make us feel happy and sad can't they (.) snuggling up is so nice
(7) FRIZAN: yeah

In the excerpt, the continuers support an ongoing narrative, confirming the status of FRIZAN as a legitimate narrator (turns 2, 4). In turn 6, the acknowledgement token that opens the turn (*oh*) is a special type of acknowledgement token, defined by Heritage *change-of-state token* (Heritage 1984). Change-of-state tokens display that the previous turn has produced a change in cognitive status in the speaker, for instance providing new information. In facilitation, change-of-state token upgrades the epistemic authority of the author of the prior turn at talk, in this case FRIZAN, by displaying how his or her actions have made a difference. The second part of turn 6 summarises the facilitator's interpretation of the meanings and implications of FRIZAN's narrative. Such a summary is another type of facilitative action of feedback, called *formulation*. With a formulation, the facilitator proposes the gist of children's contributions (Skarbø Solem and Skovholt 2017, Baraldi 2019) to show understanding, while promoting further communication by opening interactive spaces for clarifications or confirmation of the summary proposed. In the excerpt, the formulation displays the facilitator's active listening by extracting a gist of FRIZAN's narrative. The summarised interpretation of the narrative, the formulation, can be utilised as a platform for the interlacement of new narratives. In turn, 7 FRIZAN validates the formulation. Children's validation of formulations is an important aspect of facilitation. Formulations could be used to impose the facilitator's interpretations of children's turns at talk. It is therefore important for facilitation that formulations are open to be validated (or not) by the author of the summarised turns at talk, so as to acknowledge his or her status as the owner of the knowledge produced during interactions. By producing a formulation, and exposing it to FRIZAN for validation, the facilitator positions the child as a high epistemic authority in the local context of the interaction.

Repetitions are another action of minimal feedback where the duplication of the previous turn at talk or, more frequently, the partial duplication of previous turns at

talk, displays active listening, encouraging further talk. Excerpt 2 captures the use of repetition in the educational practice observed (turn 4).

Excerpt 2

Participants	FACilitator, MUSHTAQ (m, 7, MB), FREYA (f, 7, MB), SUE (f, 7, NMB)
Setting	School1, pm session
Length of the workshop	45′
Length of the excerpt	40″ (min 11 in the workshop)
Local context:	FREYA suggests that she can draw a figure very quickly, and a conversation is started by children about 'things that I can do fast'

(1) MUSHTAQ: I eat my breakfast quickly how long does it take you?
(2) FREYA: what (. . .) (laughs) not sure bet I'm quicker than you
(3) SUE: I eat it all up in 6 minutes.
(4) **FAC**: 6 minutes

MUSHTAQ: how long does it take you?
6. FREYA: Seven minutes, no, five minutes

In the practice of facilitation, repetitions are often combined with questions in the same turn at talk. Such complex turns at talk, including more than one type of facilitative action, proved effective in promoting children's active participation in the interaction. Children's reactions to the combination of repetitions and questions ranged from minimal answers (the most common reaction) to more extended contributions.

Excerpt 3

Participants	FACilitator, RICKY (m, 7, MB)
Setting	School2, am session
Length of the workshop	45′
Length of the excerpt	45″ (min 50 in the workshop)
Local context:	RICKY is sharing a story about a day away with his family

(1) FAC: oh, that's fab (.) (puts thumb up) did you enjoy it?
(2) RICKY: Yup
(3) FAC: and if you don't mind me asking what did you guys do then?
(4) RICKY: bits and bobs
(5) FAC: bits and bobs ((laughs)) what is bits and bobs (.) did you guys like doing bits and bobs?
(6) RICKY: yeah

In excerpt 3, turn 1 offers another example of the use of change-of-state tokens, combined with a polarised question to support the expansion of the narrative. In turn 5, the repetition of part of the previous turn displays active listening. The repetition is combined with another polarised question to support the expansion of the narrative. As it is often the case with polarised questions, the expansions of the narratives that are achieved by the polarised questions (turn 1 and turn 5) are minimal. In the observed practice of facilitation, continuers and acknowledgement tokens were often combined, to display active listening, at the same time upgrading the epistemic authority of children. Excerpt 4 illustrates the combination of continuers and acknowledgement tokens.

Excerpt 4

Participants	FACilitator, JOSH (m, 7, MB)
Setting	School2, pm session
Length of the workshop	45′
Length of the excerpt	15″ (min 27 in the workshop)
Local context	JOSH is presenting a family portrait

(1) JOSH: (laughs) this is me and my big sister when we were little (.) I'm little and she is bigger
(2) FAC: ah ah
(3) JOSH: it was when I was just born (.) that's my favourite teddy next to me
(4) FAC: Aaaah

In excerpt 4, a continuer that invites further talk (*ah ah*, turn 2) is used in combination with a change-of-state token (*aaaah*, turn 4). The change of state token positions JOSH as the author of knowledge that makes a difference for the facilitator. Minimal actions of feedback are particularly effective to support the production of narratives, without asking significant (and possibly intrusive) interactive work by the facilitator. Excerpt 4, as the other excerpts discussed in this article, is exemplary of a facilitative use of actions of minimal feedback that have proved successful in sustaining dialogic pedagogical practice by positioning children as legitimate authors of knowledge.

Conclusion: facilitation for dialogic pedagogical practice

From an empirical point of view, facilitation is the use of actions-in-interaction that aim to change the local contexts of children's educational experiences promoting equity, empathy and empowerment of all participants (Baraldi *et al.* 2021, 2022, Farini and Scollan 2021, Farini *et al.* 2023). Facilitation aims to position children as authors of knowledge for themselves and for adults by systematically upgrading their epistemic authority. If narratives are shared dialogically, they can be enriched by including other voices and perspectives within a polyphonic space.

Based on a thorough consideration of pedagogical and sociological research, combined with authors' reflection on their own pedagogical practice, this article suggests that facilitation can sustain dialogic pedagogy by positioning all participants

in educational interactions as authors of knowledge with equal epistemic authority. Facilitation can be successful in promoting the social conditions for dialogic pedagogy, by upgrading children's epistemic status as authors of knowledge in classroom interactions.

Facilitation may reach beyond the local context of specific interactions, contributing to tackle challenges advanced by current policies that shape working with children. International policy documents indicate that children's engagement in education is higher if their epistemic status as authors of knowledge is recognised. For instance, the *OECD Education Policy Outlook: Working Together to help Students Achieve their Potential* (OECD 2019) suggests that education should prioritise trust in children's choices as a cornerstone of educational practices based on dialogue between all stakeholders. Dialogue is considered by the UNESCO as a characteristic of quality education that can support *Sustainable Development* (UNESCO 2020). The *Birth to 5 Matters* white paper (2021), developed by the professional association Early Years Coalition, links sustainable education to dialogue. Sustainability can be facilitated by dialogue, because dialogic practice secures inclusiveness as diverse needs and interests can be expressed and listened to. The policy document *Realising the Ambition, Being Me* (Education Scotland 2020) insists that working with diverse families, children and staff requires dialogue as the main tenet of sustainable practice.

It is suggested that facilitation can construct the positive learning environments advocated by Sylva and colleagues in the influential report The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (Sylva *et al.* 2004). Positive learning environments are fluid, constructed and reconstructed through continuing dialogue, which can be initiated by the adults, as well as by the children. As argued by Murray and Cousens (2020), the onus is on the adults to explore ways of listening to children. It is the adults, rather than the children, who need to learn how to learn. In line with Dahlberg *et al.* (2006), facilitation recognises that practitioners working with children should take the risk of respectfully listening to children. Alderson (2008) and Penn (2011) support a refocus and extension of the general phrase of 'listening to children'.

Facilitation positions children as authors of valid and valued knowledge, thus nourishing their unique talents. From this angle, facilitation can transform the local context of interaction into the *Third Teacher* as in the Reggio Emilia Approach (Rinaldi 2012) and advocated, in the UK context, by policy documents such as Out to Play (Education Scotland 2018) and the Children's Play Policy Forum's Play Builds Children (The Children's Play Policy Forum 2019).

This article proposes a theoretical discussion to produce a concept of facilitation that ought to be solid enough to sustain the practice of dialogic pedagogy. If, following Matthews, dialogue in adult–child interactions is 'the starting point, whereby children are consulted and listened to' and 'their ideas are taken seriously' (Matthews 2003, p. 268), dialogue is at once the form in which facilitation develops empirically (as dialogic facilitation) and the outcome of facilitation (as facilitated dialogue).

The viability of the proposed concept of facilitation as the foundation of dialogic pedagogical practice has been shown when discussing exemplary excerpts from the authors' work as facilitators in primary schools. The authors are currently building a large corpus of recorded educational activities, where facilitation is used to promote dialogic pedagogical practice. Further research is being planned to identify the potential

and limitation of a wider range of facilitative actions. We hope that this article can animate a debate around the authors' view on facilitation, around the relationship between facilitation and dialogic teaching, around the authors' critical stance towards mainstream methodologies that are generally considered as viable options to promote dialogic pedagogical practice. Such debate will help the authors to reflect on their own research and practice but, most importantly, a lively theoretical discussion is necessary to the practice of dialogic pedagogy in a changing and complex society.

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Data availability statement

All data underpinning this publication are openly available from the University of Northampton Research Explorer at: https://doi.org/10.24339/0460fe8b-3c94-42d9-9536-c31d62ac8911.

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