

Chapter 3

Observing Children's Capabilities as Agency

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3.1 Introduction

In the past 10 years, the capability approach (Sen 1999a) has increased its importance as a theoretical framework aiming to define and measure individual well-being and used in different fields of human development (Robeyns 2006). In many areas, the capability approach has enhanced various and different research methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, as well as dialogue among disciplines.

This chapter aims to enrich this interdisciplinary dialogue with two concepts originating from the sociology of childhood (hereafter SC), i.e. children's participation and children's agency. The use of these concepts established potential elements of convergence with the basic concepts of the capability approach (hereafter CA). Drawing on some empirical examples of promotion of children's participation and agency, the chapter shows that these two concepts can fruitfully support the CA in approaching the issue of children's well-being.

The significance of childhood depends on narratives built in societies, which are constructed in different ways. In modern Western societies, the mainstream narrative of children is an individualistic and developmental narrative. In a large number of papers and books, including the studies of James and Prout (1997) and Qvortrup et al. (2009), the SC has observed that the focus on the future of children overlooks the importance and characteristics of their present life, actions, and views of the world. The focus on development regards the "becoming" of children rather than their "being" children; in other words, children are important because they will become adults. The narrative of children's becoming has produced many methods and techniques of children's education and protection.

The CA is influenced by the narrative of children's becoming. Sen (1999b: 4) states that "capabilities that adults enjoy are deeply conditional on their experience

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as children". Adopting this perspective, the CA has focused more on future outcomes of children's socialisation than on observation of children's wellbeing. This perspective is based on the combination of liberal theories and psycho-pedagogical theories. Liberal theories do not consider children in their conceptual framework for their inability to make choices for themselves. Psycho-pedagogical theories are based on a "socialization paradigm emphasizing children's development towards becoming mature human beings in the future" (Kjørholt 2002: 70). Therefore, the CA generally pays more attention to children's development and children's protection than to the promotion of children's participation, although it considers participation in social settings as a key element. This preference is clearly stated in Dixon and Nussbaum (2012):

When people talk about children and children's rights, they often talk about the vulnerability of children (p. 573). When it comes to a vulnerability principle, for example, an important component to a CA (...) is that it recognizes human frailty and vulnerability as central parts of the human condition for adults as well as for children (p. 584).

However, many doubts have been expressed about the adequacy of methods and techniques based on the narrative of becoming in promoting children's participation. The main problem is that negative or insufficient expectations about children's participation create important barriers to the achievement of children's capabilities. For example, as Twun-Danso (2010: 136) notes, in Ghana, children's passivity depends on their expectations that they should rely on their parents' actions in their best interests; however, there is evidence that parents are retreating from their responsibilities, thus preventing the development of their children's capabilities. As Lansdown (2010) writes:

children are denied opportunities for participation in decision making and the exercise of responsibility in many areas of their lives, because of extended social and economic dependency and an enhanced perception of the need for protection. This, in turn, reduces opportunities for developing the capacities for emerging autonomy, which then serves to justify their exclusion from decision making. A downward spiral is thus created (p. 16).

In this chapter, we aim at observing how children's participatory practices can enhance children's capabilities, i.e. freedoms and opportunities to act, and functionalities, i.e. ways of doing and acting.

On the one hand, participation can be considered as a fundamental right in itself, on the other hand, it is also a means to achieve other rights. Participatory practices can involve a transfer of power to children and can therefore have an important impact in terms of socio-cultural change, improving respect for children as citizens and holders of rights.

We will first clarify the concepts of participation and agency in the CA and the SC. Then, we will highlight how the concepts of conversion processes and factors, which originate in the CA, can be analysed in the perspective of Conversation Analysis and Social Systems Theory. The former involves the observation of interactions as organised sequences of actions, whereas the latter observes social systems as communication systems. Both approaches can be applied to promotion of children's rights to agency, i.e. to children's rights to participate in decision

making. In particular, we will consider the social conversion processes and factors in the education system, looking at the social structures of this system. We will analyse some adult-children interactions, which were videotaped during interventions of facilitation with the explicit aim to promote children's participation. Finally, we will discuss the general features of facilitation as a social conversion factor and promotion of children's rights to participate in decision making.

3.2 Children's Participation and Agency

According to Sen (1999a), participation means the possibility for individuals to make decisions about their own life freely; therefore, participation is considered fundamental in human development processes. The CA conceives participation as both a way to achieve individual development and as part of a capability set. According to Sen (1985, 1993) and Crocker (1998), a capability set should be evaluated in terms of quality as well as quantity of available opportunities. Therefore, a capability set is linked to variety of options; on the other hand, ways of doing and acting (i.e. functionings) are linked to the individual use of these opportunities (Clark 2006). Decision making is the activity that translates the abstract concept of participation in empirical reality, and it is the process in which we can observe how capabilities are managed. Nigel Thomas (2007) suggested that it is possible to distinguish between two competing visions of children's participation, focusing respectively on (1) children's and adults' sharing of the process of decision making, or (2) on shifting power from adults to children, as an outcome of decision making.

Against this backdrop, some studies have conceptualised capabilities as freedom to choose (e.g. Schokkaert and Van Ootegem 1990), or human talents and skills (e.g. Jasek-Rysdahl 2001). Sen (1999a) draws a distinction between "well-being freedom" and "agency freedom", the latter implying the individual capacity to exercise free will:

the capability set would consist of the alternative functioning vectors that she can choose from. While the combination of personal functionings reflects her actual achievements, the capability set reflects the freedom to achieve: the alternative functioning combinations from which this person can choose (p. 75).

Sen (1992) has stressed the importance of self-determination. However, children are excluded from self-determination as they are not considered rational and reasonable beings. According to Nussbaum (2000: 78), rationality and reason consist in "being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life". This way of analysing the development of capabilities implies an individualistic approach and a primary interest in the future of children as adults. In this perspective, children are usually observed as lacking 'agency freedom', and children's functionings are considered fundamental in determining the full development of children's future capabilities as adults. According to Saito (2003: 26), "when dealing with children, it is the freedom

they will have in the future rather than the present that should be considered". However, it is possible to apply the CA to children, although they are not mature enough to take decisions for themselves.

In the SC, children's participation is associated with children's agency in their present life (James 2009; James and James 2008; James et al. 1998). Agency can be defined as "the capacity of individuals to act independently" (James and James 2008: 9). In this perspective, agency means that a course of action is one among various possibilities (Giddens 1984; Harré and van Langhenove 1999) and implies the availability of a range of choices of action for the individual. However, the concept of agency does not only indicate an individual competence, but also the social relationships in which individuals are involved (Alanen 2009; James 2009). Observing social relationships, it is possible to find out if and how individual competences can be converted in capabilities. Children's participation can regard formal decision making (Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010: 357), as well as social relationships that characterise their everyday practices.

It is possible to understand agency as the capability of individuals to both shape their own lives, and to influence their social contexts. However, children's agency can be observed only in specific forms of social participation, which highlight children's right of choosing and making decisions. Agency means opening up different courses of action in communication processes. By opening up these different courses of actions, agency can also enhance social change; therefore, agency can be defined as a specific form of active participation that enhances unpredictable social change, thus showing children's capabilities as opportunities to achieve functionings, i.e. to achieve ways of acting. Hence, the meaning of children's agency is closely associated with change and unpredictability in social processes, particularly in interactions, in which children's actions always affect their interlocutors' actions; more specifically, agency means that individual actions can also enhance the transformation of the structures of interactions.

The SC claims that in many social practices, participation is seen primarily as an instrument for the smooth functioning of society, unilaterally designed for adults (Craig 2003; Jans 2004; Matthews 2003). The institutional attention continues to be focused much more on the contribution of social systems to children's development rather than on children's active contribution to social systems (Prout 2003). Therefore, children are expected to fit into adult ways of participating in institutional contexts. In this context, the goal of changing the societal status quo through children's participation is observed as prominent. Participation is primarily observed as an involvement in decision making (Blanchet-Cohen and Rainbow 2006; Hill et al. 2004; Sinclair 2004; Thomas 2007) through which children can feel influential (Holland and O'Neill 2006). This approach supports the recognition of children's rights to participate in decision making concerning social systems.

To sum up, agency can be observed by analysing three aspects. Firstly, agency can be observed as participation in social processes rather than as individual freedom. Agency is visible in communication processes, in particular in interaction as a specific social system, i.e. communication system. According to Niklas Luhmann (1984), a social system is composed by a series of communicative events,

and reproduces itself through recursive communication processes, in which each communication event refers to other communication events (e.g. “how are you?”, “Fine thanks and you?”, “I’m fine” etc.). Interaction is a specific type of communication system, which exists when the participants perceive one another, i.e. when participants’ mutual perception is relevant for communicating. If capabilities are observed as a display of agency, they are visible (and therefore *exist*) only if they are displayed in communication. Therefore the interplay of individual capabilities and social structures can be explained by observing how children’s actions are included in communication systems. This approach thus highlights children’s multiple competencies in social contexts by stressing the importance of children’s agency in communication, e.g. in educational interactions (e.g. Baraldi 2008; Baraldi and Iervese 2010).

Secondly, agency does not only imply individual competence in acting, which is displayed in communication systems, but also specific social conditions promoting the expression of this competence. If for some children participation may open up new opportunities, choices and rights to take decisions, for others, who live in situations of conflict and poverty, participation may simply be essential to assure their right to survive, e.g. in conditions in which children need to work (Biggeri et al. 2006; Liebel 2003). Therefore, children’s agency cannot be achieved without the establishment of particular social conditions, i.e. particular structures in social systems.

Thirdly, agency can be seen as a way of promoting change of social structures (Giddens 1984); children’s agency can be seen as right to promote structural transformation, e.g. planning the urban environment (Baraldi 2003). Children’s participation in difficult situations can also be seen as a key strategy in transforming their relationships with adults, e.g. the relationships with parents in the case of working children (e.g. Abebe and Kjörholt 2009).

Ultimately, observing children’s agency means looking at (1) the structures that promote agency in communication processes, and (2) the ways in which agency modifies the structures of communication processes. Against this backdrop, our main questions are: To what extent can children’s agency enhance social change? What kind of social change is possible through children’s agency? How is this social change achieved?

3.3 Social Conversion Processes and Factors

Already in the early 1990s, Rogoff (1990: 22) stated that: “children are not separate entities, that become capable in the future”, but they are “inherently engaged in the social world”. In the last years, the CA has increased its interest in children as autonomous social agents. In particular some recent studies, mobilizing the CA, have conceptualized children as capable agents (Babic 2011; Biggeri et al. 2011; Biggeri et al. 2006). This interest has been translated into research that considers: (1) children’s activation of capabilities through their participation in social contexts

(interacting with peers and adults); (2) children's capabilities as the result of a social coordinated process, not only as individual skills.

In relation to these two aspects, the CA asserts that children's ability to convert resources and commodities into capabilities and functionings depends on *conversion factors*. Both individual freedom and group freedom may be enhanced or constrained by access to resources, i.e. by "entitlements" (Sen 1981, 1984). The ways in which these resources can be used depend on "conversion factors" (Burchardt and Vizard 2011). The CA accounts for interpersonal variations in the conversion of resources and commodities into capabilities and functionings. These interpersonal variations depend on different kinds of conversion factors: *personal* factors (e.g. metabolism, physical condition, sex, reading skills, intelligence); *social* factors (e.g. public policies, social norms, discriminating practices, gender roles, societal hierarchies, power relations); *environmental* factors (e.g. climate, infrastructure, institutions, public goods). Conversion factors affect individual abilities to transform means into achievement, i.e. what is generally called the individual conversion rate (Sen 1992); conversion factors are "technical" constraints determining conversion rate, which indicates the conversion factors affecting and determining individual abilities in transforming resources into achievements.

We have looked at communication systems promoting children's active participation seen as the social conversion processes of children's human resources (or human capital), including rights, into capabilities as agency. In this perspective, the social conversion factors of agency can be observed in communication systems – in particular in adult-children interactions – which shape policies, practices and roles and which break the 'generational order' of children-adults social relationships (Alanen 2009), based on power relations and societal hierarchies. On the basis of the existing generational order, children participate in hierarchically structured communication within social systems, which restricts their agency. For this reason, in social systems, children's agency is less developed and is observed as less relevant than adults'.

The achievement of children's agency needs the construction of specific opportunities, in particular it needs specific adults' promotional actions. Given the mainstream narrative of children, adults' actions have frequently the only aim of stimulating children's actions as responses to adults' questions or instructions. Children's agency requires specific conditions of promotion, not just elicitation of actions. In particular, the promotion of children's agency requires that adults' actions aim to enhance unpredictability of children's active participation. The paradox here is that actions showing children's agency are promoted by adults' actions; therefore, the incidence of children's agency in social systems is proportional to and interdependent with the incidence of adults' agency. The social relevance of children's agency is proportional to the relevance of its social promotion. However, the promotion of children's agency is not achieved through adults' individual actions; it is achieved in communication systems, as the interplay of adults and children's actions.

Against this backdrop, the promotion of children's agency cannot mean building consensus or searching for an agreement, but opening, accepting and managing differences and conflicts in communication processes (Baraldi and Iervese 2010). One of the most challenging narratives in the past few years (and probably one of the most stimulating for the future) has been the importance of children's active participation not only in terms of having the right to be heard (art. 12, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) and to expression (art. 13, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), but also the right to choose among alternatives in communication systems, i.e. in terms of practicing agency rather than simply having voice. For example, children can be heard and can express their rights by asking for more time to play or for less homework, but the real difference regarding their rights is their possibility to decide rules and time for play and homework. Supporting and improving children's capabilities means promoting children's participation beyond their right to speak and to be heard, to a wider concept of active citizenship, which means rights to contribute to the structuring of social systems. In this approach, therefore, children's capabilities are displayed in social forms, i.e. as forms of agency in communication systems.

The methodological problem in researching children's agency is to observe the interplay between children's active participation and adults' actions enhancing participation rights, thus investigating the ways in which children's agency is promoted and children's choices are supported in communication processes (Baraldi and Iervese 2012). An analysis of this kind regards the ways in which:

1. Children and adults' actions are interrelated (e.g. certain answers follow certain questions or proposals);
2. Each action influences another one, making it relevant or likely (e.g. certain questions or proposals influence certain answers);
3. The chains of these actions constitute interactions as communication processes;
4. These interactions are part of wider communication systems (e.g. education, families, healthcare);
5. Communication systems highlight the meanings of children's active participation. Children's active participation can be highlighted in communication systems, through: (a) the production of information (what children say) and the ways of acting (how children say it); (b) the change that this production of information and these ways of acting introduce in specific communication processes, (c) the change that this production of information and these ways of acting promote for social structures (e.g. of education, families, healthcare) that are visible in communication processes, i.e. agency.

This kind of analysis offers two important advancements in the study of social conversion processes. Firstly, it makes it possible to observe how children and adults' actions are coordinated, as both children and adults are responsible and competent interlocutors in interaction. This clearly does not mean that there are no social differences between adults' actions and children's actions, but that we need an "analytically symmetrical" approach (Christensen and Prout 2002) to make them visible. Secondly, this analysis makes it possible to observe interactions within

wider communication systems, such as the education system (Luhmann 2002). Therefore, it enables the observation of children's capabilities and rights to participate in decision making in both interactions and wider social systems, as a result of a 'participation chain' (ib.) that involves both children's actions and adults' actions. The observation of the participation chain, and the ways in which it affects social systems, enables the empirical description of conversion processes.

The analysis of interactions, as specific communication systems included in wider communication systems (e.g. education system, family, healthcare system), provides a way of understanding and describing children's capabilities as agency. This analysis requires a methodology to closely observe how children and adults' actions are interrelated in the interaction, and how children's agency can enhance social change. An effective methodology of this kind is Conversation Analysis (Sacks et al. 1974). Conversation Analysis observes interaction as a sequence of actions (turns) produced by the participants. This sequence is organised, as any action reduces the range of possible next actions (Goodwin and Heritage 1990) and new actions show their being in tune with former actions. Conversation Analysis regards participants' ways of taking turns (acting) in the interaction and organising sequences of turns. Agency can be analysed as displayed through the design of turns and in the sequence organisation in which these turns are included (Heritage and Clayman 2010). Turn design indicates how agency is displayed, i.e. it indicates the ways in which children take initiatives and make decisions, and sequence organisation affects the success of agency, as children's initiatives are intertwined with their interlocutors' actions and reactions, which condition their success; participants' agency can be observed through the ways in which their actions 'project', i.e. influence, the content and the design of next actions.

Conversation Analysis also highlights that sequence organisation in the interaction is based on particular social structures. One interesting example of these structures is epistemic authority (Heritage and Raymond 2005), i.e. authority in the management of rights and responsibilities for knowledge and information. For example, in the education system, the teacher's role implies rights and responsibilities for teaching, and in the healthcare system the doctor's role implies rights and responsibilities for diagnosis and therapy. Epistemic authority depends on the social construction of participants' epistemic status (Heritage 2012), i.e. the social construction of their autonomous access to knowledge and information. In the interaction, children's participation can be described as recognition of epistemic status and display of epistemic authority, for example in the interplay between children's talk initiatives, and adults' reactions to these initiatives, which can be either assessments of children's performances or recognition of children's rights of access to knowledge. In particular, the recognition of epistemic status and the level of epistemic authority are made visible in the interplay of children and adults' actions that upgrade (recognition) or downgrade (assessment) rights and responsibilities for knowledge.

The analysis of structures of interactions is not sufficient to explain children's agency and its promotion, as specific interactions cannot ensure stable conditions for children's active participation. The analysis of the structures of wider social

systems, in which these conditions are established, is needed. This analysis can include the following structural presuppositions: (1) coding, i.e. a basic distinction between positive and negative values guiding and structuring communication systems (Luhmann 2000); (2) positioning, i.e. the forms of roles or personal expression created and established in the social systems, in which children and adults' participation is made meaningful and their actions are made intelligible (Harré and Langhenove 1999); (3) forms of expectations (Luhmann 1984), originating from coding and positioning and defining the ways in which adults and children are expected to act in the interaction. In the case of the education system, coding is evaluation, which distinguishes between correct and incorrect children's positioning, observed as students' role performances, and expectations have a cognitive form, i.e. they are expectations of change of children's personalities. Based on these structural presuppositions, agency is not adequately enhanced (James and James 2004) in the education system.

To sum up, the possible indicators of agency and promotion of agency in communication processes are:

1. Turn design (e.g. questions, assessments, minimal responses, such as "okay", "yes", "mm");
2. Sequence organisation (positions, combinations and alternations of different turns);
3. Structures of the interaction (e.g. epistemic status and authority);
4. Structural presuppositions of the social systems in which the interactions are included (coding, positioning, forms of expectations).

The structural presuppositions of these social systems (education system, healthcare system, etc.) can be considered as the most important social conversion factors from resources and rights of choosing into capabilities as agency, as we will see for the case of the education system in the next section.

3.4 The Analysis of Social Conversion Factors in the Education System

The present analysis draws on a long-term research project based on video-recorded classroom interactions involving children and adolescents. In particular, we have analysed data regarding special forms of education, such as education to dialogue, positive relationships, respect of cultural difference, peace and memory of war and violence. Data were collected in different settings and geographical areas; the investigated interactions were based on different methodologies, but "facilitation" of communication was their common form. Facilitation is interesting because it aims to create adequate conditions for children's agency.

In the present and following sections, we shall present some examples of sequence organisation, which show the ways in which facilitation of children's

participation was achieved in some of the recorded interactions. In particular, we shall analyse some unpublished data, collected in a research project, regarding the facilitation methodology, known as Methodology of Narrative and Reflection (hereafter MNR). MNR is employed by an association of teachers working as facilitators in many schools of an important Italian town (Genoa). The research project analysed interactions in ten classrooms, for a total of 42 meetings between facilitators and students, and about 84 h of recorded and transcribed interaction. In what follows, we shall analyse three extracts from this huge corpus. The analysis of these extracts aims at showing some social conversion processes and factors regarding capabilities as agency. For this purpose, in our analysis we shall distinguish between the general presuppositions of the promotion of children's active participation and the specific presuppositions of the promotion of children's rights to agency, i.e. specific right to participate in decision-making in social systems. The general presuppositions of active participation consist in those social structures that promote children's actions without important consequences for social change, i.e. for decision-making. The specific presuppositions of rights to agency consist of those social structures that allow children to participate actively in social change, by participating in decision-making in social systems.

This analysis shows that social change can be enhanced through children and adults' turns, but it is determined only in the self-organisation of a communication system. Adults and children's actions enhance the building of specific structures of interaction, e.g. particular forms of epistemic status and authority, reducing the range of interlocutors' actions; these interactional structures can trigger structural changes in the wider social system. Therefore, social change may concern both the structure of the interaction (e.g. epistemic status and authority), and the structures of social systems including the interaction (i.e. coding, positioning and forms of expectations).

The main sequence organisation in classroom interaction between teachers and students is the IRF sequence (Mehan 1979), which is made up of teacher's Initiation (often questions), student's Reply, and teacher's Feedback (evaluation). Each of these actions is designed in such a way as to project the next one. This form of IRF sequence is based on the social structures of teacher's superior epistemic status and authority, evaluation (coding), positioning of teachers and students in role performances, and cognitive expectations. These structures work as social conversion factors of a very limited children's participation, because children are positioned in the role of responders, and in the uncomfortable position of being evaluated for their replies. The IRF sequence indicates a hierarchical structure of the adult-children interaction and of the wider education system in which this interaction is placed; this hierarchical structure restricts the opportunities of conversion from children's resources to children's capabilities.

This form of IRF sequence has been observed as persistent in classroom interactions, although with some variations and mitigations (e.g. Farini 2011; Margutti 2010; Walsh 2011). Our data do not confirm that this form of IRF sequence is generalised. Rather, they highlight the existence of other forms of IRF sequences, which are enhanced by the specific structure of facilitation. Facilitation is activated

in situations in which adult's evaluation of children's actions is discouraged, and the interaction is based on mitigations of hierarchical structures, and favours dialogue, positive relationships, and respect of different perspectives.

The analysis of our data shows that facilitation frequently includes IRF sequences in which facilitators ask questions and give feedback. However, these sequences are structured differently from the traditional ones. Extract 1 concerns the interpretation of Saverio's behaviour. Saverio is the protagonist of a written text, including a narrative concerning children, which was handed out to the students and commented on in small groups, following a recurrent procedure in the MNR. In extract 1, the facilitator asks a question in turn 1, about Saverio's needs as they emerged from the text. A student (M1) answers in turn 2, and the facilitator gives a feedback in turn 3. This feedback is not an evaluation of turn 2, rather it is a formulation (Heritage 1985), which glosses the meaning of turn 2 and thus acknowledges understanding and acceptance.

Extract 1

1. FAC: quindi quale esigenza dimostra questo Saverio o chiunque sia?
So, what kind of necessity does Saverio or whoever show?
2. M1: desiderio di compagnia comunque
Desire of company anyway
3. FAC: quindi al gruppo non si rinuncia
So you can't renounce the group

Formulations summarise, gloss, or develop the gist of an earlier statement; they "advance the prior report" by "shifting its focus, redeveloping its gist, making something explicit that was previously implicit in the prior utterance, or by making inference about its presuppositions or implications" (Heritage 1985: 104), projecting a direction for subsequent turns by inviting new responses from answerers. Formulations, as third-turn feedback, seem to be particularly useful to enhance children's active participation in interactions. They can both show understanding and acceptance of the previous turn(s), and project further turn(s), in which students can actively participate. Formulations reveal that first-turn questions are referential questions which look for students' autonomous perspectives. Therefore, IRF sequences that include formulations can facilitate (i.e. promote and support) children's active participation.

Here, however, we are interested in children's initiatives and in their (potential) agency, rather than in facilitators' initiatives. Therefore, we shall comment on sequences in which: (1) children initiate the sequence through a turn design that displays potential agency (I); (2) facilitators reply through a turn design that either promote or does not promote opportunities for children's agency (R); (3) children give some feedback, either exploiting or not exploiting the opportunity they are given, thus projecting facilitators' subsequent actions with their own actions (F). We are interested in these forms of IRF sequence because they may potentially promote children's agency (and capabilities). In the following section, we shall

describe three examples of IRF sequences; all of them are initiated by children and show the interplay between children's participation, the self-organisation of facilitation interactions, and wider social systems.

3.5 Forms of IRF Sequences and Facilitation

In this section, we will show how different forms of IRF sequences, which are achieved through facilitation of classroom interactions, can lead to different results in terms of rights to children's agency.

In extract 2, the children introduce some relational problems with their teachers. The facilitator tries to stop their claims by diverting the topic of conversation. Extract 2 shows that the children's initiatives may be blocked in the interaction, preventing the achievement of both children's agency and change of epistemic authority in the interaction.

Extract 2

1. M1: In questa classe no va beh non lo dico, magari qualcuno sta più zitto di un altro, cioè che non disturba il professore, allora se quello che è stato zitto e fa una verifica da schifo, cioè l'aiuta e magari gli dà lo stesso voto di quello che fa più casino anche se ha fatto le cose più giuste.

In this classroom no ok I won't say it, maybe someone is more silent than others, I mean he doesn't disturb the teacher, so if the one who was silent does really bad on a test, I mean he helps him and maybe he gives him the same mark as the one who disturbed even if this did better.

2. FAC: e diciamo che umanamente possono succedere queste cose, ma ma voi stavate dicendo invece, mi pare, che emergesse un concetto, vorrei capire se è condiviso, che l'insegnante se deve aiutare tutti, deve aiutare il singolo.

And let's say that it is human that these things can happen, but but you were saying that, instead, it seems to me that a concept emerged, I would like to understand if it is shared, that if the teacher must help everybody, he must help the individual.

3. M2: Se se lo merita.

If he deserves it.

In turn 1, M1 (a male student) introduces the topic of the difficult relational situation in the classroom, showing direct access to knowledge, i.e. a high epistemic status. In turn 2, the facilitator makes a quick comment about the complaint

introduced by the student (*let's say that it is human that these things can happen*), then she changes the topic, although with some embarrassment, as shown in the repetition of "but" and in the use of "it seems to me" (*but but you were saying that instead it seems to me*). In turn 3, M2 aligns with the new topic proposed by the facilitator, although with an autonomous comment (*If he deserves it*) that shows some reluctance to accept the facilitator's positioning.

In this case, the student (M1) initiates the sequence, showing his epistemic status (autonomous access to knowledge about the relationship with the teachers) and upgrading his epistemic authority (right and responsibility in producing knowledge about this relationship). However, the facilitator blocks the student's initiative, restoring her own epistemic status and therefore the normatively expected organisation of the interaction, by upgrading her own epistemic authority. Firstly, she upgrades the level of abstraction of the argument (*let's say that it is human that these things can happen*); secondly, she combines her formulation (*you were saying*) with an indirect question (*I would like to understand if*), positioning herself as questioner. Another student (M2) aligns with the facilitator's positioning, accepting her upgrading, although showing some degree of autonomy in his epistemic status, by restricting the facilitator's formulation. The hierarchical structure of the interaction is preserved through the facilitator's positioning in the second place of the triplet. The students' agency is not promoted, and no change is visible in the hierarchical structure of both the specific interaction and of adult-children communication. However, the students' attempts to upgrade their status and the facilitator's hesitation in rejecting these attempts, show that this form of hierarchical structure creates some problems of communication: this structure is not smoothly accepted, as the students show their interest in upgrading their epistemic authority, and the facilitator shows her interest in avoiding impositions or directions.

Extract 3 concerns a discussion about the ways of dealing with difficult, and possibly violent, situations, which was enhanced by the reflection on the text in the handout (the numbers in the extract represent the seconds of pause).

Extract 3

1. M1: perché lei cioè se uno si fa avanti cos'è giusto? È giusto darsi o allontanarsi? Secondo lei chiedo.
because you I mean if someone makes a step forward what is the right thing to do? Should you accept or go away? In your opinion I mean.
2. FAC: non non non ti rispondo perché è una scelta personale, è una scelta personale, è una scelta personale.
I won't won't won't answer because it's a personal choice, it's a personal choice, it's a personal choice.
3. ((hubbub))

4. M2: sì va beh.
Yeah right.
5. FAC: è sempre difficile rispondere.
It's always hard to answer.
6. M1: discutere.
Discuss.
7. FAC: io ne ho sempre buscate molte.
I always got beatings.
8. M3: eh?
9. FAC: ne ho sempre buscate e ci sono delle persone che danno botte e in questo caso era mia sorella, e non c'era verso, era fatta così cosa fai? Questo era il suo modo di comunicare capito? Quindi io telavo (2) telavo però bisogna vedere chi è vincente e chi perdente.
I always got beatings and there are people who hit you hard and in my case it was my sister, and there was no way, that's how she was what should you do? That was her way to communicate you know? So I would leave (2) I would leave but we should see who's the winner and who's the loser.
10. M3: era più grande sua sorella?
Was your sister older?
11. FAC: era più grande e più forte e quindi chiedevo giustizia a chi doveva, a chi doveva farla giustizia.
She was older and stronger and so I would ask for justice to those who were supposed to do justice.
12. M1: i genitori.
Parents.
13. FAC: eh in questo caso Saverio (2) Saverio può chiedere giustizia a qualcuno?
Eh in this case Saverio (2) Saverio can ask anyone to do justice?

Extract 3 shows that children's initiatives can lead to a contingent, but unstable change. In turn 1, M1 takes the initiative and asks a question about the facilitator's personal positioning regarding the topic of the conversation. In turn 2, the facilitator refuses to answer this question (*I won't won't won't answer*), trying to avoid introducing her personal positioning in the interaction (see extract 2). However, this reaction provokes evident, although not explicit, perplexities among the students (turns 3, 4). Therefore, in turns 5, the facilitator mitigates her refusal (*It's always hard to answer*), and in turn 7 she changes her positioning, reporting a personal story, thus violating the same rule that she said she would follow. This change in the facilitator's positioning projects interest among the students. Firstly, it projects surprise (turn 8: *Eh?*), then it projects upgrading of a student's epistemic status as questioner (turn 10), a status that very frequently applies to facilitators. In turns 9 and 11, the facilitator adapts to this new structure of the interaction,

continuing in her unusual narrative; however, at the end of turn 11, she changes her positioning from responder to questioner, changing the topic of conversation, and announcing the restoration of her prominent epistemic status. In turn 12, M1 aligns with the facilitator's question, and in turn 13 the facilitator stabilises her usual positioning, neutralizing students' further attempts to display agency.

In this case, the student initiates the sequence, upgrading his epistemic status as questioner. Initially, the facilitator replies by adapting to the student's initiative and positioning, thus downgrading her own status and supporting the student's upgrading. The students support this change with their positive feedback. However, the facilitator re-positions herself as soon as possible, upgrading her authority and restoring the organisation of the IRF sequence. The IRF sequence is expanded by the facilitator in order to restore the hierarchical structure of the interaction. In this case, the students' agency is *contingently* promoted, as the facilitator, after an hesitation, decides to answer the students' question; this choice leads the facilitator to a contingent and unstable change of her positioning, from questioner to answerer, and from leading the interaction to leaving more opportunities for the children's participation. However, this change is promptly reversed in the facilitators' coordination, through a reference to Saverio, the protagonist of the story.

Extract 4 shows how facilitation can create the opportunity for more radical and coherent change in the interaction.

Extract 4

1. F1: A me è piaciuto intanto molto perché abbiamo potuto dire le nostre opinioni liberamente, senza la preoccupazione del voto, come se fossimo delle persone che possiamo dire le nostre cose liberamente insieme ad un gruppo e questo mi è molto piaciuto.

I liked it a lot first because we could express our opinions freely, without any concern about marks, as if we were people who can freely express in a group and I liked that a lot.

2. Fac: qualcun altro vuol dire cosa pensa del lavoro fatto insieme.

Does anyone else want to say what they think of the work we did together.

3. M1: Per me quello che ha detto F1 è vero che anche a me mi è piaciuto molto questa idea e mi chiedevo un po' come mai gli adulti vogliono capire dai bambini.

I think what F1 said is true that I also liked this idea a lot and was kind of wondering why adults want to understand from children

4. Fac: Eh! Che carino!

Eh! How nice!

5. M1: Eh, di solito l'adulto spiega al bambino, giusto? Però una volta siamo noi che con la nostra opinione possiamo spiegare agli altri. Questa idea mi è piaciuta perché vedendo gli altri non è piaciuta solo a me ma anche agli altri.

Eh, usually adults explain things to children, right? But for once it's us with our opinion explaining to others. I liked this idea because seeing the others it was not just me but the others who also liked it.

6. Fac2: vai avanti abbiamo bisogno che tu continui.

Go on we need you to go on.

7. M1: perché questa idea mi è piaciuta, perché vedendo gli altri non è piaciuta solo a me ma a tanti altri.

Because I liked this idea, because seeing the others it was not just me but many others who liked it.

8. M2: è stata interessante, entusiasmante.

It was interesting, exciting.

9. Fac2: lui ha fatto una domanda, come mai gli adulti vogliono sapere dai bambini. Qualcuno di voi riesce a rispondere?

He asked a question, why adults want to know from children. Can anyone reply?

10. F2: Secondo me perché vogliono sapere come si sentono loro e le loro e le loro opinioni in questo lavoro, cosa abbiamo fatto, se hanno capito il senso del-

In my opinion because they want to know about their feelings and opinions about this work, what we did if they have understood the meaning of-

11. M1: oppure per aiutarci.

Or to help us.

12. M3: Perché sì che hanno studiato e sono andati a scuola, ma vogliono sapere dai bambini cose che non sapevano, opinioni.

Yes because they studied and went to school, but want to know from children things they didn't know, opinions.

13. Fac: Quello che ho capito da M3 sembra che i grandi vadano a scuola e i ragazzini sono le maestre.

As far as I can gather from M3 it sounds like adults go to school and children are the teachers.

14. M4: Io volevo dire anche che gli adulti vogliono sapere da noi le cose, perché ai loro tempi non ci sono le cose che ci sono adesso e quindi ci sono molte più cose.

What I meant is that adults also want to know things from us, because when they were children there were not the same things there are now and so there are many more things.

15. M1: anche per me.

I think so too

16. M2: e vogliono saperne di più per sapere come comportarsi e aiutarci.

And they want to know more to know what to do and how to help us.

In turn 1, a student (F1) stresses her satisfaction for the interaction with the facilitator, as it allowed students' free expression of opinions, without evaluation and personal positioning. In turn 2, the facilitator invites the other students to express their opinions. In turn 3 M1 confirms the narrative of F1, adding a question on the reasons of adults' interest in understanding from children (*was kind of wondering why adults want to understand from children*). In this turn, M1 is not only expressing his opinion, he is also upgrading his epistemic status, by proposing a new interpretation of the meaning of the interaction with the facilitator. In turn 4, the facilitator shows her appreciation for this status, stressing her personal positioning (*Eh! How nice!*). Her appreciation projects the continuation of M1's discourse, in which the student upgrades his epistemic authority, which originated from his confirmed epistemic status, through the explanation of his point of view. The student's explanation is rather complex, in that it includes three parts. Firstly, M1 asks a question to receive confirmation of the typical structure of adult-children interaction (*Eh, usually adults explain things to children, right?*); he does not wait for an answer to this question, continuing with the second part, in which he observes the novelty of the present situation (*But for once it's us with our opinion explaining to others*); finally, he adds a comment about the importance of children's overall satisfaction for this change (*I liked this idea because seeing the others it was not just me but the others who also liked it*).

In turn 6, the second facilitator (who is positioned as an observer in the interaction) invites M1 to continue; it is interesting to observe that, in order to explain her request, she does not stress her "interest", but her "need", confirming the importance of dismissing the hierarchical structure; the facilitators need the children's views in order to understand the meaning of the interaction. However, M1 simply repeats the third part of his previous turn, showing that in fact he has completed his narrative. His positioning does not conclude the conversation, as M2 intervenes to stress his interest in the interaction, using the empathic term "exciting" to describe it. In turn 9, the second facilitator asks a question to the whole classroom, formulating the focal point in the interaction, i.e. the reason for adults' interest in children's views. Three children answer this question, expressing different opinions, and in turn 13 the facilitator picks the last answer, formulating a gloss of the third child's explanation; she glosses it as a way of dismissing the hierarchical structure of positioning between adults and children, thus showing understanding and justification for the change introduced by the students. This formulation projects three new comments, thus enhancing the reflection on the change in the structure of the educational interaction.

In this case, a student (F1) initiates the sequence, upgrading her own epistemic authority. The facilitator supports the student's initiative, positioning and display of expectations, downgrading her own epistemic authority. In this way, she enhances feedback from other students, and encourages their positioning and display of expectations as capable agents, thus upgrading their epistemic status. The same structure is repeated in the following turns. In these turns, the facilitators ask questions and formulate the gist of previous turns, as usually happens in this form of facilitation. However, this situation is peculiar in that the usual design of facilitators' turns is promoted by children's agency; therefore, facilitators stress children's agency by promoting their epistemic status and authority. This promotion is particularly relevant as the conversation focuses on the dismissal of the hierarchical structure of education: in promoting the right to children's agency, not only do facilitators enhance a different structure of the interaction, but also an explicit reflection on this different structure. In this case, the paradox of agency, i.e. the fact that actions showing children's agency are promoted by adults' actions, is very evident in the interplay of facilitators' promotion and students' active participation.

3.6 Discussion

In both teaching and facilitation, IRF sequences are based on specific social structures (structures of epistemic status and authority, coding, positioning, and form of expectations). Different IRF sequences are based on different social structures and have different consequences for children's agency. In this chapter, the analysis of facilitation in classroom interactions has highlighted social conversion processes and the corresponding social factors converting children's human resources and rights of choosing into capabilities as agency.

In particular, the analysis has highlighted three different forms of facilitation, which, at a first glance, can be observed through facilitators' positioning aiming to promote children's participation:

1. Mitigated hierarchical positioning (extract 2). This form of positioning is "mitigated" because it does not try to control or direct a communication process; rather it diverts this process, on the basis of the facilitator's re-positioning in the interaction. This form does not upgrade children's epistemic status and authority.
2. Contingent personal positioning (extract 3). This form of positioning is "contingent" because it provisionally adapts to children's initiatives as well as to their epistemic status and authority; however, this initial positioning is followed by the facilitator's hierarchical re-positioning.
3. Stable personal positioning (extract 4). This form of positioning is "stable" because it is not followed by any re-positioning. It affects the hierarchical structure of the interaction and upgrades children's epistemic status and authority.

The facilitators' turns, which steadily affect the hierarchical structure of the interaction, are second-turn feedback, which depend on and adapt to children's initiatives; these turns are designed as minimal responses, invitations to talk, promotional questions, and formulations glossing children's first turns. These forms of second turn can project and support children's third turns, which continue the narrative initiated by children in first turns.

Positioning, however, is only a component of the various forms of facilitation. Therefore, we need to observe the differences among these forms, in order to fully understand promotion of rights to agency. We have observed: mitigated hierarchical facilitation, which rejects children's positioning through feedback (extract 2); personal facilitation, which is forced by the children's initiatives and contingent, as it is followed by quick recovery of a mitigated hierarchical form (extract 3); and personal facilitation, which steadily dismisses the hierarchical structure of the interaction (extract 4). The latter is based on the following structural presuppositions: (1) coding as distinction between positive, equal active participation and negative, unequal participation; (2) form of positioning, which gives primary value to personal expressions; (3) affective form of expectations, which is a form of expectations regarding participation as personal expression, rather than role performance (Baraldi 2008, 2009). Therefore, personal facilitation is based on a coding that substitutes evaluation with the distinction between equal participation (positive value) and hierarchical participation (negative value), and on personal positioning and affective expectations.

The analysis has highlighted that different forms of facilitation have different consequences for the promotion of rights to children's agency, i.e. rights to participate in decision-making:

1. Mitigation of hierarchical structure downgrades children's capabilities as agency, although without any explicit negative evaluation;
2. Contingent personal positioning, followed by hierarchical re-positioning, enhances unstable facilitation of children's capabilities as agency, followed by its downgrading through questioning;
3. Stable personal positioning enhances the successful upgrading of children's capabilities as agency, by dismissing the hierarchical structure of the interaction.

The upgrading of children's capabilities as agency changes the meaning of children's rights, from the right to say what they think when adults take decisions for them (art. 12 UNCRC) or the right to free expression (art. 13 UNCRC), to the right to participate in decision making regarding social systems, therefore participating in their structural change. Articles 12 and 13 of the CRC imply that all children are entitled to be informed, to express their views and to have their views taken into account, but they do not extend rights to children's decision making. The recognition that children can exercise their rights to decision making implies a transfer of epistemic authority and responsibility for decisions from adults to children, and a correspondent change in adults' way of acting: adults need to negotiate capabilities with children. This shift could lead the CA to consider that (1) children have their own capabilities *as children*, (2) children attach their own

relevance to capabilities and (3) children's capabilities influence adults' capabilities in social systems.

Coding as distinction between positive equal participation and negative hierarchical participation, personal positioning, and affective form of expectations are the successful social conversion factors from children's resources and rights to children's capabilities displayed as agency. These conversion factors cannot be produced only in specific, contingent interactions, but should be produced as stable structures of wider social systems. These social conversion factors upgrade children's epistemic status and authority, by (1) eliciting the introduction of particular issues by children, (2) creating opportunities for children's telling of their own stories, and (3) enhancing the construction of new, alternative narratives concerning children as social agents. Under these circumstances, children can be co-promoters of structural change in social systems: coding, positioning and form of expectations are created in the interplay of facilitators and children's actions.

The social conversion factors described are not frequently observed in classroom interactions, for two reasons. Firstly, it is difficult to drop the traditional form of IRF sequence, as students are used to it and display expectations regarding facilitators' questions and feedback, and position themselves as responders in the interaction. Secondly, this difficulty influences the meanings of facilitators' actions, which can be interpreted as different ways of asking questions and giving feedback, without considering the importance of children's initiatives, as initiations and feedback. Therefore, an interesting and not sufficiently explored analysis is about the extent to which facilitation of children's agency can become a stable form in the education system. The right to agency and the corresponding facilitation process cannot be guaranteed by any Convention; they require a change regarding structural presuppositions of social systems that involve children's participation. For this reason, at present, it seems rather difficult to change conversion processes and factors in the education system, towards an effective promotion of children's rights to agency. In order to promote a structural change of this kind, newly, systematically structured curricular activities would probably be necessary, e.g. facilitating interactions among children in a "classroom context mode" (Walsh 2011) or, more radically, withdrawing from claiming any superior epistemic authority in interactions with children (Edwards et al. 1998).

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