From enabling environments to environments that enable.

Notes for theoretical innovation at the intersection between environments, learning and children's agency

1. Introduction. Flipping the narrative

Since 2012, the term *enabling environment* has been one of four themes of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the core document that defines guidelines for pedagogical practice in English and Welsh Early Years settings. An enabling environment is described as a rich, stimulating and safe space offering opportunities to play, to be, to learn and to explore both physically and mentally. The EYFS describes the environment for play and learning in terms of the following three aspects: the emotional environment relating to atmosphere and feelings, the outdoor environment relating to accessible spaces and activities, the indoor environment relating to accessible spaces and activities. Environments that enable strive to be children-centred so that children are valued and encouraged to be independent, resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.

However, the idea of enabling environment is not exempt from criticism and some of its ideological underpinnings can be unpacked. Keevers and Treleaven (2011) invite to deconstruct 'tools of the trade' and 'ways of working' by asking reflective and diffractive questions. An interrogation of the concept of enabling environment as presented by the EYFS reveals an adult-centric vision: adults are the demiurges who construct the rich, stimulating and safe space where children *find* offering opportunities to play, to be, to learn and to explore both physically and mentally that are *offered* to them. Adult-centric refers to the situation whereby adults enable children through the environment.

Building on the interrogation of the current concept of enabling environment, this article proposes an innovative theoretical discussion focusing on the dynamic relationship between environments, learning and children's agency by introducing a new concept: *environments that enable*. Environments that enable is a concept that aims to *flip the narrative* underpinning the concept of enabling environments, in particular the position of children and adults in educational contexts.

Enabling environment and environments that enable do not entertain a dichotomic relationship. Rather, the invite is to see them as two positions of a continuum of pedagogical practices: the semantic of enabling environments includes the empowerment of children as decision-makers while the role of adults is recognised by the semantic of environments that enable.

Nevertheless, a difference between the two concepts concerns the ontological status of children. Both enabling environments and environments that enable acknowledge children's capability to construct their own social worlds; however, environments that enable position children as the *enabled* and as the *enabler*, that is, as stakeholders and authors of their own learning within the context of early years educational practice. The ethos and practice of environments that enable recognise the child as an autonomous producer of knowledge and support the child in the expression of that knowledge (Rinaldi, 1998; 2005; Pahl, 2007; Edwards et al., 2011; Edwards et al., 2016).

Enabling environment describes a positive action by adults to transform a previously non-enabling environment, therefore emphasising the role of adults-as-enablers. Environments that enable positions the environment, understood as the network of relationships and interactions, at the centre. It is that network that enables, with the active participation of children are authors of knowledges and responsible decision-makers, not the creative actions of adult demiurges.

An introduction to what environments that enable look like does not explain what they are. What is the image of children underpinning environments that enable? What are the characteristics of practitioners-children interactions in environments that enable? What are the characteristics of environments that enable*?*

These are crucial questions, for an article that argues how environments that enable represent an instance of pedagogical methodology that promises to fill the gap, signalled by pedagogical and sociological research (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Baraldi & Iervese, 2012; Mica, Peisert & Winczowek, 2012; Baraldi & Farini, 2013; Warming, 2013) between theoretical and ideological representations of childhood on the one hand and implementation of children's participation and self-expression in actual practices on the other hand. Paraphrasing Freire's distillation of progressive pedagogy, environments that enable are created *with* children, *for* children, *from* children *for* adults. The concept of environments that enable aligns with a culture of childhood that places particular emphasis on socialising children towards an understanding of their own competencies in planning, designing, monitoring and managing social contexts (Matthews, 2003) rather than towards the achievements of pre-determined, whether inscribed in curricula or not, states-of-development. Environments that enable can be supported only by adults who welcome the risk of trusting children (Baraldi & Farini, 2013). The next section will discuss trust as a pillar of theory and practice of enabling environments.

2. A pedagogy of trust

Trust supports decision-making in situations of risk (Kwong, 2019); following Milona (2019), trust is composed of a *desire* and a *belief* that the positive outcome of risky decision-making is possible. Applying this concept to environments that enable, belief refers to the need of trusting children, albeit within the limits required by safe-guarding policies, as agents with autonomous rights and responsibilities. However, Boronski and Hassan (2015) suggest that trust is intrinsically fragile in the domain of education, because adult-child relationships are based on the position of children as *not-fully-competent-yet* (Baraldi & Corsi, 2016). D'Cruz research (2018) suggesting that trust is domain-specific can explain why the level of trust in children can vary dramatically in different social contexts, for instance moving from the family to education.

With regard to trust in educational contexts, Tovey (2007) and Tovey and Waller (2014) argue that adults may prevent children-decision making because of past experiences, expectations or even fear of their own responsibility. Risk-prevention attitudes *dis*-able environments, limiting the opportunities for children to practice decision-making in situations of uncertainty.

Key to environments that enable is trust in children decision-making. Adults can create enabling environments where the risk of children-decision making is reduced by adults planning. However, the prevention of risk limits the scope and meaning of children's decision making, and with it the meaning and scope of the empowerment of children.

If the focus shifts from the adults and what they can do to combine prevention of risk and children's empowerment as agents to the networks of relationships, the well-known paradox between participation and protection disappears. Both protection and participation are co-constructed in interactions framed by equality in the possibility to contribute to communication. Equality that extends to the access to the status of enable-r and enable-d. Environments that enable is a relationship-based culture of education that requires mutual trusting commitment and can only thrive if the expectations that orientate communication concern personal expressions rather than role performances. The example of *pedagogia relazionale* from the Reggio Emilia approach (Rinaldi, 2006) is of course relevant; however, environments that enable are characterised by a peculiar attention to trusting commitments. Empowering and enabling children as decision-makers, rather than promoting risk aversion has been advocated as a core component of children-centred pedagogies (Knight 2012; Tovey and Waller 2014), because shared problem-solving require space for thinking and trial and error that are amplified by hands-on experiences where children deal with risks (Knight 2013; Solly 2015).

Interactions can either reinforce trust or invite sceptical attitudes. Educational interactions are not loose talk: they construct a local context where the adult participants embody the 'adult world' in the eyes of children. Adults' attitude towards children's display of agency in form of choices or personal initiatives can promote children's trust in personal expression but if such attitude is negative, distrust and risk-avoidance will prioritize a safer retreat into role performances. Domenicucci and Holton describe the interactive expansions or retreat of trust as a two-place relation (2017). By suggesting that children's trusting commitments are based on lived experiences, because trust is necessarily relational, and levels of trust is influenced by specific interactions, Domenicucci and Holton indirectly, but effectively, make the case for environments that enable as agents of change in adults-children relationships and therefore in children's disposition towards educational practice. They also make the case for the crucial importance of adult-children interaction and the position of children in it. The unstable foundation of trust in education makes environments that enable a particularly interesting example of pedagogical innovation where participants replace distrust and control with trust and risk. Environments that enable are not only an interesting object of theorising, but also a powerful resource for change.

3. Agentic environments built upon listening

Trust creates favourable conditions for the recognition of children's *agency*. Moosa-Mitha, offers a clear definition of agency as the possibility for children to "respond, mitigate, resist, have views about and interact with the social conditions in which they find themselves" (2005: 380). This definition of agency accounts for three interrelated dimensions: 1) action (*respond*, *mitigate*, *resist*), 2) perspective (*have views*) and 3) social context (*interact with social conditions*). Agency does not merely refer to participation in social situations, but to a form of social participation where children's actions are not determined by adults' actions, and therefore fits neatly with the philosophy underpinning environments that enable.

Although important social constraints for children's autonomous actions are acknowledged, for instance with regard to safeguarding and protection of the child (Bjerke, 2011; Valentine, 2011; Oswell, 2013; Wyness, 2014; Baraldi, 2015; Farini, 2019; Scollan and Farini, 2019), agency entails the autonomous capacity of 'acting' knowledge in social interactions (Bath, 2013; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Moss, 2009; Pascal and Bertram, 2013). Environments that enable can be approached as an example of contexts that favour children's agency, therefore supporting educational practice to fulfil the dictate of article 12 of the UNCRC.

A robust tradition in social research, considers children's capability to both shaping their own lives and influencing their social contexts as evidence of agency, if influencing social contexts in underpinned by children's choices (Lansdown, 2005; Markstroem and Halladén, 2009; Baraldi, 2014). This article argues that children's capability to both shaping and influencing their social contexts is at the same time the presupposition and the pedagogical outcome of environments that enable. Agency in environments that enable relates a communication structured by expectations of personal expression rather than expectation of role performances. Methodologically, epistemologically and ethically, environments that enable are underpinned by a choice: doing *with* children, rather than *for children* (Freire, 1998). Children in environments that enable are positioned as learners, explorers, decoders but also as problem-solvers, scientists, creators. They are the challengers, the investigators and the risk assessors and are recognised as the authors of valid knowledge. This multifaceted position of children within environments that enable can be facilitated by sustained-shared thinking and listening (Prout, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford & Hallet, 2014; Waller, 2014) based on a form of educational communication that has recently inviting attention of research: *facilitation* of children's agency (Wyness, 2013; Baraldi, 2014; Baraldi & Iervese, 2017; Baraldi et al., 2018). Facilitation is a form of communication characterised by the interaction between adults' actions that enhance, and children's actions that display, agency. Facilitation can take form in a wide array of actions. A non-exhaustive list may would include promotional questions to invite clarifications and further discussions; acknowledgement tokens confirming and appreciating the interlocutors' positioning; comments to support the ongoing interaction; formulations aiming to secure a shared understanding of the gist of previous turns of talk and their implications. Several researches have examined the specific impact of facilitative actions in a range of social context (for instance Black, 2008; Bohm, 1996; Gergen, McNamee, and Barrett, 2001; Baraldi, 2013; Baraldi and Gavioli, 2020, Baraldi et al., 2018). Notwithstanding their varied morphology, facilitative actions share a common endeavour: upgrading children's status and authority as producers of valid knowledge and decision-makers. Based on the positive value of children's active and equal participation, on the treatment of children as persons who can express their own perspectives, experiences and emotions, and on expectations of unpredictable personal expressions, facilitation is the fundamental structure of any interaction that sustains environments that enable.

Facilitation creates expectations concerning: the fair distribution of active participation in interaction (equity), the display of sensitivity towards the interlocutors' interests and needs (empathy), the treatment of disagreements and alternative perspectives as enrichments in

communication. When such expectations become a stable structure of educational interactions, dialogic education is constructed.

Dialogue is "the starting point, whereby children are consulted and listened to", ensuring that "their ideas are taken seriously" (Matthews, 2003: 268). In dialogue, adults' actions show active listening, support children's self-expression, take children's views into account, involve them in decision-making processes, and share power and responsibility with them (Shier; 2001). The adjective "dialogic" thus effectively connotates the methodology of facilitation: adults as facilitators are agents of dialogue because facilitation support children's authorship of valid knowledge (equity), values personal expressions (empathy) and replaces hierarchical control of the interaction with coordination of different perspectives.

By upgrading children's status and authority in the interaction, facilitation positions children as agents who can choose the ways and contents to express their perspectives and experiences, co-constructing the social contexts of their experiences (Baraldi & Iervese, 2014; 2017; Wyness, 2013). Environments that enable are contexts of dialogic communication where facilitation promotes children's choices; for this reason, agency is at the same time their presupposition and their outcome (Bamberg, 2011). Facilitation promotes and celebrates children's autonomous production of knowledge, and the interactional construction of environments that enable is a possible outcome of it. Facilitation promotes children's agency, including children's autonomous initiatives in different ways. On the one hand, facilitators' actions can enhance children's choices; however, in environments that enable where adults and children are enabler as well as enabled, children's contributions can enhance professionals learning and participation in child-led interactions.

While the 'Reggio Approach' was becoming globally renowned, Malaguzzi wrote the poem *ed invece il cento c'é* (*no way, the hundred is there;* Malaguzzi, 1997) to communicate the idea that whilst adults impose to the child one world to learn about and to live it, children have the capability to build and inhabit one hundred and more worlds. The poem captures an image of children who are competent and capable communicators, who are able to share their thinking, feelings, interests and knowledge with those who are willing and able to listen. *Listening* is both key to environments that enables and a fundamental condition of children's agency (James, 2009; James and James, 2008; Leonard, 2016; Oswell, 2013). In line with Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2006), facilitation recognises that those working with children need to develop respectful listening to children. Alderson (2006) and Penn (2011, 2014) support a refocus and extension of the somewhat general phrase of 'listening to children'. Lundy (2007) argues that listening is one thing, hearing and responding to what a child is saying or expressing

is a completely different. Listening, hearing and acting upon what children express are important themes to be explored when considering if, and how, what environments enable is children's agency rather than more effective role performances. Within environments that enable, learning is viewed as a genuine partnership, where voices and choices of all stakeholders are listened.

**4. The voices of children in the environments that enable**

Similarly to several voices within the debate on educational practices, Wyness (2000) and the Organisation Mondial Pour l´Éducation Prescolaire (OMEP, 2010) recognise that if children's agency is to be taken seriously, adults should listen to perspectives and ideas expressed directly by children in all matters that relate to their life experiences. Environments that enable are social spaces where the voices of children are listened to and facilitated in their expression. Critical pedagogy does not rely on slogans and this is true with regard to 'voices of children'; the articulation of 'voices of children' may be inaugurated with reflection on the concept of 'giving children a voice'. Firstly, it is pertinent to ask the questions: *who is giving children a voice? do not children have a voice already?*

Alderson (2008) argues that children's voices are not something that should be given; rather, it is something that children already have. Adult-defined discourse can hold power to the extent that 'voices' from children are viewed as being *given by* the adult. This has implications in practice because it makes the role of the adults pivotal as, for example, within the methodological and epistemological underpinnings of *enabling environment* as opposed to *environments that enable*.

If environments that enable are contexts of communication where expectations that structure interaction concern adults' promotion of the voices of children, it is important to consider, following Lundy (2007) and Jones and Welch (2013), that structures or interactions within educational practice can silence both voices and participation of children, due to dominant rules or behavioural sanctions emanating from pedagogy and power hierarchies.

Adults' professional identities, current legislation, organisational cultures and dominant narratives concerning intergenerational relationships impacts on how children's intentions, expression and voices are heard and responded to (Wyness, 2013). Adults' position within cultures of practice and its influence on patterns and levels of listening can be described using the concept of *listening filters* that can either promote or prevent agentic listening to occur (Farini, Scollan and McNeill, 2020). A model is offered below to illustrate the dynamic

relationship between listening filters and children's voices and choices, what it has been referred previously as 'children's agency'.
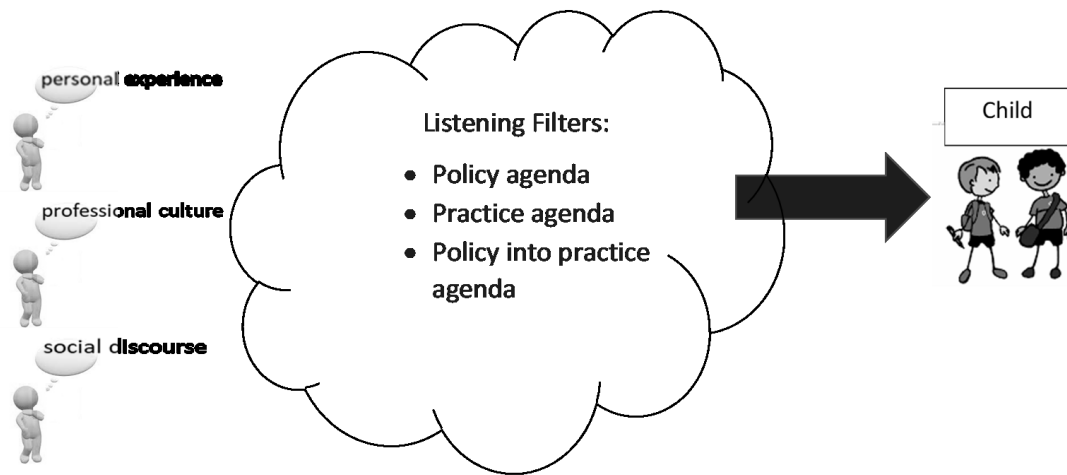
Inspirational for the concept of listening filters, Osler and Starkey (2010) discuss how perspectives on the rights of the children are based on social, economic and cultural positioning of the actors, thus going beyond a prescriptive approach to their implementation. Trevarthen (2011) and Alderson (2012) build upon Osler and Starkey's point arguing that the contextualized 'child' is dependent upon the environment, available resources and the adults that inhabit their world to capitalise on their innate self-advocacy. This consideration for the influence of the social contexts is surely integral to the concept to children's agency as discussed in section 3 of this article.

Environments that enable can be sustained only if adults access space and time to listen to and interact with children so that children can speak and be heard within a rights-based lens. Jones and Walker (2012) and Jones and Welch (2013) propose an insightful reflection that can be used by professionals who wish to promote children's voice within environments that enable: Jones, Walker and Wench invite adults to see themselves as *commentators* of children's contribution within dialogic interactions. As commentators, adults build their contributions around children's ones, to emphasise a vision of children as active agents with opinions and valid contributions to make. Environments that enable are built upon a pedagogy of listening; what are their characteristics?

5. The characteristics of environments that enable

Environments that enable are physical and social spaces that promote decision-making and action, where children are empowered to be agents in their own learning, as well as in other participants', learning. As previously introduced, the main characteristic of environments that enable is that they are co-constructed by adults with children. Sylva and colleagues influential report (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education* (EPPE) does not explicitly discuss environments that enable; however, the characteristics of positive learning environments illustrated by the report relates the features of environments that enable: continuing dialogue that can be initiated either by the adults or the children, strong parent partnerships, and staff with up-to-date knowledge and understandings of how to combine care and education to respond to young children's holistic needs.

In England, where the authors of the article work and research, important policies and position papers such as the *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2012), the *EYFS* framework (DfE, 2017) and the *Pre-school Learning Alliance* (2017) converge in recognising 'enabling environments' as indoor and outdoor spaces that nurture a sense of belonging, offer children risk-taking opportunities, encourage individual exploration and celebrate diversity and difference. Whilst those characteristics of enabling environments are surely not averse to children's agency, environments that enable are much more than that, because the position of children at their very foundations concerns the status of children as enabler and constructors of knowledge *for themselves and for adults*.

What marks a difference between enabling environments and environments that enable? The main difference is a shift in the energy that fuels the environment, from adults' decision-making to relationships and interactions, where a variety of contributions and positions are woven together to create a well-organised, planned, safe and challenging learning situation. Environments that enable do not depend on demiurgic agents; rather, the source of enabling is the living amalgamation of spaces, people, identities, emotions, communication and shared experiences. Environments that enable are more than the adult and more than the child, they are *contexts* for intent, agenda and interest. The power of relationship pervades any action and any understanding of action, going much further than what any adult can offer or plan. Environments that enable have a 'more than' affordance and value. More than the child, more than the adult and more than the resources: they are networks of interactions structured by expectations of personal expressions that favours trust and active participation as persons rather than roles, generating dialogic forms of education.

If environments that enable are interpreted as a form of communication rather than a set of resources, the distinction between indoor environments and outdoor environments vanishes.

Either indoor or outdoor, an environment enables when children are not prevented from developing their 'self' holistically while their individual well-being, health and learning needs are met. Freedom, spaces, resources and well-thought-out opportunities need to be provided to ensure this (Maynard and Waters, 2007). Skilled and knowledgeable professionals can justify choice of resources, how and why environments enable and empower, how and why staff are deployed, and how progress and next steps are being questioned with children via dialogic interaction and reflection (Canning, 2014; Murray, 2017; Ofsted, 2017). The professional who is committed to the maintenance of environments that enable is an organiser of learning that is always ready to learn, a maestro who is prepared to be taken away from the music.

Both indoor and outdoor spaces can be the substratum of those networks of interactions that we define environments that enable. However, it is important to consider important research, for example Leather (2012), and its recognition that outdoor provision enhances life skills, health and well-being, which boost well-being, emotional literacy, and personal, social and emotional development.

An example of how outdoor spaces can be the physical bedrock of environments that enable is offered by the Forest School movement and its ethos based on outdoor and woodland education, celebrating freedom and spiritual connectedness (Forest School Association, 2018). The Forest School philosophy that underpins practice celebrates and promotes enthusiasm for nature, emotional literacy, risk taking and problem-solving skills, which in turn enhance self-esteem and confidence (O'Brien and Murray 2007; Constable 2014; Murray 2017). In fact, during outside exploration and 'being', children can be at one with the environment and in the environment. Steiner's educational approach recognises that being outside, in nature, with a never-ending resource of open-ended opportunities supports children's spiritual and creative dimensions. Children are influenced positively whilst interacting with the natural environment; this is empowered by the presence of an adult who is prepared to offer a balanced approach with repetitive guidance and interaction when needed, which enables rather than disempowers (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Mathers et al., 2014; Wood, 2014 2015).

Against any one-dimensional ontological reductionism of the child, Forest School, and environments that enable with it, promote and celebrate the unique skills and knowledge of each child, creating opportunities to express them. In the methodology of Forest School, outdoor spaces offer opportunities for children's exploration, risk-taking, co-operation and reflection, and for this reason Forest School can be approached as a methodology compatible with the development of environments that enable. However, outdoor environments do not enable per se; what marks a difference is the network of relationships and interactions between

participants that are observed by agents. And, of course, what marks a difference is the positioning of the child as the unique child, who is at the same time a unique person, a learner and a teacher before being a pupil.

Within environments that enable, children's decision-making is not conditional on adults' approval. This is not necessary when interactions are based on trust. Children's choices, decisions and experiences do not wait for and adult to concede their legitimacy. Also, they are not the consequence of adults' planning and decision-making. Rather, they are building blocks of environments that enable. Children's choices, decisions and experiences are embedded in practice and planning by education professionals who are both willing and able to listen to children's unlimited and unique expressions.

However, the centrality of children's empowerment and the willingness of the adults to trust children do not remove the need for a sound and safe management structure to make sure that any pedagogical strategy is fully understood, compliant with statutory regulations and implemented by all staff. In a nutshell: *children deserve to be safe if they get it wrong*. Similar to any other effective educational environments, environments that enable need clear policies and channels of communication. Participatory forms of management, where leadership is exercised by different staff in different situations, is a defining characteristic of environments that enable from an organisational point of view. The possibility to exercise leadership within the framework of the theory, methods and ethos of environments that enable is directed towards fostering professional creativity (Craft 2011; Nutbrown 2012, 2013; Moss 2016). Environments that enable are compatible with organisational arrangements where resources and staff are deployed by knowledgeable experts who are accountable for their decisions. Staff are key to the success of any educational environment and must share, own and therefore they should be involved in developing the setting's pedagogical vision, strategy and rationale (Pascal and Bertram 2014). This is an organisational imperative: the reasoning behind why resources are chosen or made available to children and where staff are deployed must be shares with, and be understood by, all staff.

5. Conclusion

This article proposes a theoretical elaboration centred around an innovative concept that aims to offer the intellectual foundations for the development of pedagogical practices interested in the intersection of environments, learning and children's agency.

As a concluding remark, the authors would emphasise that risk and pedagogical demands of environments that enable should be acknowledged and recognised; however, if children are

to be taken seriously as primary stakeholders in their education, as well as citizens who have a right to be consulted and heard, then avoiding the risk of trusting children's decision making, creativity and social skills is a luxury that education should not, and the authors would say *cannot*, afford.

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