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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Challenge of Facilitating Migrant Children's Proposals in Deliberative Meetings: A Single Case Analysis of Policy Lab Meetings

Claudio Baraldi

This paper presents qualitative research on the facilitation of Policy Lab (PL) meetings held in a Belgian city. PLs are types of mini-publics that aim to apply a deliberative form of democracy by increasing citizens' participation in the elaboration of new policies, tailored to their needs. PLs are held with the collaboration of specialized stakeholders and policymakers and include both plenaries and small group workshops. The investigated PL meetings aimed to involve migrant-background children with the aim to improve their integration in the local school system. In these PL meetings, stakeholders were adult migrants and members of education services. The paper focuses on the facilitation of the Belgian meetings, discussing the function of facilitation of migrant children's participation in deliberative democracy. The analysis is based on the videorecording of two meetings. On the one hand, this analysis shows a directive form of facilitation limiting children's agency, in terms of choices of ways and contents of their contributions to deliberations. On the other hand, it shows that the children are able to exercise agency and to make proposals to enhance the democratic development of school policies.

Keywords: policy labs; facilitation; agency; migrant children

Introduction

This paper deals with the ways of facilitating Policy Labs (PLs), which are initiatives aiming to improve collective participation in the elaboration of specific policies, through the collaboration of citizens, specialized stakeholders, and policymakers. PLs aim to give voice to citizens' proposals and recommendations in participative democratic processes, leading to recommendations for the political system, which are at the core of deliberative democracy (Bächtiger & Goldberg 2020; Ramis-Moyano et al. 2025; Setälä & Smith 2018). PLs are developed through a series of meetings, which are grounded in different ways of empowering participants' contributions. In initial plenary discussions, icebreaking and brainstorming allow for general ideation of proposals. Small group workshops enable the construction of practical proposals/recommendations. In final plenaries, the results of workshops are presented and discussed, leading to final proposals or recommendations. These PL meetings are managed by facilitators.

PLs have been experimented for the first time by the Council of Europe Network of Intercultural Cities with its members (2017–19). Other PLs have been activated by the European Commission in the Eastern Partnership Countries through its EU4Youth Programme (2021–22). This presentation concerns the European project Multi-Stakeholder Labs for migrants and stakeholders (MUST-a-Lab, 2022–2024), funded by the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund, in which PLs were held in six cities (in Austria, Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, and Spain) with the aim of supporting migrants' participation in defining local policies tailored to their needs. Each PL concentrated on one or more policy issues. These issues were chosen based on local needs in the cities involved, were discussed with these cities from the planning phase onwards, and then they were subsequently discussed and renegotiated during PL meetings. This negotiation allowed participants to shape the agenda, transforming the top-down identification of issues into a hybrid model that combined top-down direction with bottom-up participation. Negotiation involved multiple stakeholders. PLs are "multi-stakeholder" because they bring together different types of stakeholders, including (a) grassroots stakeholders representing civil society, for instance, migrant or minority stakeholders; (b) influential stakeholders as civil local organizations that are experts in the PL issues; and (c) policymakers (including elected officials and executives). The PL method aims to foster fruitful exchange among stakeholders at different stages of PL activities.

In particular, the local administration of a Belgian city decided to implement a PL to recommend ways of supporting the integration of migrant-background

Studies on Language and Culture, Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia, IT

claudio.baraldi@unimore.it

children in the local school system. In the Belgian case, the PL meetings involved migrant-background children, adult migrants, stakeholders working in education services, and policymakers. This paper is based on the videorecording of these PL meetings and aims to show how migrant children's proposals were facilitated during the meetings, both in small group workshops and during plenaries. In PLs, recommendations are grounded in preliminary proposals; the present analysis focuses on children's proposals. This analysis is based on previous studies on the functions and forms of facilitation in participative meetings and the types of actions that realize this facilitation. The study adopts a qualitative method that allows for the analysis of social interactions occurring during the PL meetings.

The research question in this paper is if and in which ways facilitation can or cannot support migrant children's proposals during PL meetings. This paper, introduces a new research method and approach to address the gap in knowledge about children's participation and its facilitation in deliberative meetings. The next section clarifies the meaning of PL meetings and their facilitation, including facilitation of migrant children's participation. This theoretical section is followed by a section on research methods and data collection, showing that a very small number of children participated in the PL meetings, and by a section on research results, showing how the children's proposals were facilitated in both small group workshops and plenaries. Particularly, these two sections show two ways of dealing with children's proposals. During small group workshops, facilitation explicitly referred to children's previous talk or moved from one topic to another through "stepwise transitions" that is connecting to previous turns but changing the topic (Tiitinen & Lempiälä 2022). During final plenaries, facilitation frequently replaced or corrected children's proposals. Thus, these sections show the ways in which tokenistic facilitation can limit migrant children's participation, producing their marginalization grounded in intersectionality. The concluding section includes a general discussion on the results and some remarks about the challenge of facilitating migrant children's proposals in meetings that aim to enhance deliberative democracy.

Facilitation of Mini-Public Meetings

The realization of PLs can be contextualized in the general framework of deliberative democracy, aiming to involve citizens in the co-design and co-implementation of new public policies (Bherer, Dufour & Montambeault 2016; Cohen 2007; Landemore 2017; Min & Wong 2018). In several cases, deliberative democracy includes the implementation and facilitation of *mini-publics*, which are participative settings based on the recruitment of a limited number of participants who co-design specific policies (Lee 2024; Min & Wong 2018). Examples of mini-publics are consensus conferences, citizens' juries, and citizens' assemblies (Mehltretter Drury et al. 2021; Green, Kingzette & Neblo 2019; Knobloch & Gastil 2021; Morrell, Johnson & Black 2022; Niessen & Reuchamps 2019). PLs can be conceived as a specific way of implementing and facilitating a mini-public, which generates a democratic process that aims to empower citizens' participation in public policies. PLs provide recommendations about these policies before reaching final public decisions, which should be guaranteed by policymakers.

Mini-publics are realized through the organization of meetings, in which social interactions are important (Asmuss & Svennnevig 2009). Particularly, deliberations are based on the presentation of proposals, which can be accepted or rejected by other participants, explicitly placing their contributions in relation to previous talk (Svennevig 2012) or moving from one topic to another through "stepwise transitions," that is connecting to previous turns but changing the topic (Tiitinen & Lempiälä 2022). The advantage of stepwise transitions is that they can maintain cooperative relationships when discussing proposals, while offering a way to resist without explicitly disagreeing with them. However, stepwise transitions can leave out important differences in unaddressed viewpoints, so that the diverse perspectives can get lost.

Facilitation is considered a relevant criterion for the quality of democratic deliberations in mini-public meetings (Mehltretter Drury et al. 2021; Karpowitz, Raphael & Hammond 2009; Kuhar, Krmeli & Petric 2019; Wardale 2013) and an important way of handling expertise in these meetings (Moore 2012). In these meetings, facilitation aims to enhance a dialogic form of communication (Bächtiger et al. 2010; Bherer, Dufour & Montambeault 2016; Curato et al. 2017; Michels & De Graaf 2010), including empathic mutual understanding and communication, appreciation of different views, and respect for diversity (Eliasoph 2016; Green, Kingzette & Neblo 2019; Gutmann & Thompson 2004; Hannon 2020). More generally, facilitation of meetings is seen as a combination of empathy with fairness, openness, inclusiveness, attention to collaboration, respect, and unconditional positive regard (Cranston et al. 2015; Raelin 2006). Facilitation means both listening to what is being said and paying attention to the transformation that is occurring and the new possibilities that are emerging in the interaction (Fierro 2016).

Facilitation aims to encourage all participants to speak openly, promoting their responsibility for collaboration and autonomy (Auvine et al. 2022; Raelin 2013) and their equal opportunities to influence the flow of proposals and decisions, fostering this collaborative engagement and empowering their views (Raelin 2013). In other terms, facilitation supports participants' exercise of *agency*. Particularly, mini-public meetings are designed to enhance citizens' *deliberative agency* (Curato 2021) by encouraging them to take positions in making proposals and recommendations, expressing their personal views in contingent, dynamic, and creative ways. More generally, children's agency has been defined as their ability to act autonomously from external conditions (James 2009). Agency is a *specific form* of participation, which enhances social change (James & James 2004), and social structures are seen as open to the influences of children's agency

(Oswell 2013). Thus, children's agency can be observed as the production of choices that enhance unpredictability in these meetings, contributing to changing their trajectories (Baraldi 2022).

Participants' exercise of agency in collaborative processes is enhanced by facilitators' exercise of *agency* (Baraldi 2022; Raelin 2013) through facilitative actions, such as: (1) showing understanding, attention and interest by echoing, reaffirming, summing up, rephrasing participants' opinions; (2) providing feedback to participants and clarifying their points of view by paraphrasing their comments; (3) sharpening the issues proposed by the participants to tease out the logic of the topic under discussion; (4) asking for information and clarification; and (5) reviewing and summarizing the meeting results, interlacing proposals and decisions (Herd 2019**;** Yeung 2004a). Facilitation of participants' agency is an interactional achievement, because it is based on both facilitators and other participants' actions (Baraldi 2022).

In mini-publics, facilitation aims to promote inclusion, ensuring that all voices are equally heard (Escobar 2019), particularly "inclusion of diverse and marginalized voices" (Rountree, Park & Richards 2024: 340), supporting "a willingness to air differences" (Karpowitz, Raphael & Hammond 2009: 17) and "disagreement and multiple positions" (Williamson & Barrat 2022: 28). Thus, "participants are fully empowered to participate effectively" (Williamson & Barrat 2022: 30). In the European project enhanced in six cities in different countries, the focus of PL meetings was on empowerment of migrant-background people in implementing local policies based on their specific needs. Particularly, in a Belgian city, this empowerment concerned migrant-background children, who were supported by facilitators, adult stakeholders, and policymakers in proposing and recommending local educational policies more attuned to their needs and better promoting their integration in the school system. The general expectation was that migrant children actively participated in PL meetings. The fulfilment of such an expectation required the facilitation of the migrant children's exercise of agency.

Agency is considered the source of children's "power to make decisions that impact on oneself and others and to act on them" (Sancar & Severcan 2010: 277). Agency voices children's interests, which "are recognised through decision-making processes within which children are prominent actors" (Wyness 2018: 68), thus allowing for children's sharing of power and full responsibility in decisions (Shier 2001) and promoting their work with the local community (Matthews 2003), in the analyzed PL meetings represented by adult migrants, stakeholders belonging to educational organizations and policymakers.

Several field studies have shown the importance of facilitating migrant children's agency in the education systems (see Baraldi 2024; Baraldi, Farini & Ślusarczyk 2023; Ottosson, Eastmond & Cederborg 2017; Rigon, Dabaj & Conti 2023). Field research suggests that facilitation can support migrant children's personal expressions and the interlacement of these expressions in the interaction, thus enhancing their active contributions to democratic processes. The question is if and in which way facilitation can support migrant children's agency in PL meetings.

The *form* of facilitation is relevant to answer this question. Dillard (2013) differentiates among forms of passive, moderate, and involved forms of facilitation, where "involved" basically means "directive." Von Schneidemesser, Oppold and Stasiak (2023) show that a moderate form of facilitation can favor the expression of different perspectives. An important issue is the risk of directive facilitation of meetings, that is the risk of gatekeeping of participants' views by (1) labeling and redefining what is said by other participants, (2) assessing other participants' proposals, and (3) inviting other participants' compliance (Yeung 2004b). The risk is that facilitators control the decision-making process (Mroz, Yoerger & Allen 2018).

Facilitators may find it difficult to avoid directing meetings (Raelin 2006). Their skills might lead to the illusion of better "economic" outcome, but limiting the participants' autonomous expressions, producing the unbalance of different perspectives, preventing the collective creation of change, and disabling deliberative democracy. The challenge is to protect deliberative democracy from hierarchical decision-making and power distribution (Kadlec & Friedman 2007; Schmidt 2024).

Data and Method

Corpus, participants, and materials

Overall, the three PL meetings held in the Belgian city included two migrant-background children, one migrant adolescent, three migrant adults, 10 stakeholders working in educational services, three policymakers, and four facilitators, for a total of 20 people. This paper presents the videorecording and analysis of the first two meetings (PL meeting1 and PL meeting2), for a total of about 400 minutes. The objective of PL meeting1 was to formulate proposals, and the objective of PL meeting2 was to suggest micro-experiments to implement the proposals.

The migrant children involved in these two meetings were two students attending a primary school. The two children participated in PL meeting1, one of them (the other one was ill) participated in PL meeting2. A specific facilitator (F2) had the task of supporting the children's participation both during the small group workshops and the plenaries. Another facilitator (F1) coordinated the plenaries; she did not participate in the small group workshops. She was the leader of the facilitation team, with the task of collecting and summarizing proposals and recommendations during plenary sessions. No children could participate in the third and final PL meeting, thus they did not contribute to the final policy recommendations addressed to the local administration. Their lack of participation depended on the overlap between the meeting and school time; their school did not give permission to their participation in the meeting. Thus, children were very few and excluded from the final meeting.

Ethical and contextual considerations of children's participation

This condition is consistent with some critical studies sustaining that control over children and adult manipulation overwhelm children's participation in democratic decision-making (Freeman, Nairn & Sligo 2003; Perry-Hazan & Bauml 2023). The institutional discourse on children's participation has been criticized as incomplete, instrumental, or not applied (Fitzgerald et al. 2010). Thus, support of children's participation is prevalently a form of tokenism (Hart 1992). A hierarchical generational order of relations between generational categories (Alanen 2009) implies the capillary exercise of adults' control in adult–child relations. Adult control overwhelms children's participation (Hill et al. 2004), and children are invited to adapt to adult-driven frameworks (Prout 2003). Additionally, an intersectional approach (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall 2013; Mason 2010) can explain migrant children's marginalization, grounded in the intersection of age, condition of migrants, and possibly gender (e.g., Antyas 2012; Frödén & Quennerstedt 2020; Kaukko & Wernesjö 2017). Against this background, the question is if and in which way facilitation could support migrant children's agency in the Belgian PL meetings.

Procedures

The two PL meetings were videorecorded and transcribed, enabling the researchers to view and analyze them in detail. Today, the technology of videorecording provides a powerful tool for researching language use and participation in social interactions (Rawls & Lynch 2022). The advantage of this method of data collection is increased by the possibility of transcribing the recordings, thus transferring the data to a more manageable material support. There are some important examples of the use of videorecording of facilitation in mini-public meetings (Dillard 2013; Rountree, Park & Richards 2024; Von Schneidemesser, Oppold & Stasiak 2023). In the current study, videorecording is used to focus on the facilitation of children's proposals in PL meetings.

Shared proposals were expected as an outcome of the interlacement of children's and adults' contributions. Therefore, a challenge of facilitation was coordinating the actions of different participants for origins, age, and roles, promoting the interlacement of their proposals. This challenge concerned the combination of two potentially marginalized conditions influencing children's agency, those of "children" and "migrants." The following analysis aims to investigate if, and in which ways, in PL meetings facilitation could support migrant children's exercise of agency.

The two children participated in a specific small group workshop on "feeling welcome at school", but they did not participate in another small group workshop, about "what children need to do well at school." The plenary sessions included the presentation and discussion of proposals elaborated in the workshops. However, the children were not involved in the discussion about the workshop, in which they did not participate. The conditions of the meeting organization and management (few children, lack of participation in one workshop, lack of involvement in the plenary discussion of this workshop) did not favor the support of children's agency. Against this background, it is important to analyze the ways in which F2 facilitated the children's participation in democratic processes.

In the following two sections, several extracts from the transcriptions of PL meetings will be used to understand facilitation and children's ways of participating in the meeting. The current analysis is grounded in conversation analysis (CA) as far as it concerns the design of single actions as turns-at-talk and the interactional sequences (Heritage & Clayman 2010) in which turns of facilitators, children, and other participants were intertwined. The analysis of turn design is used to show more complex social processes, particularly the facilitation of children's proposals and the ways of expressing children's agency, demonstrated by children's choices among alternatives (Baraldi 2022). This analysis of facilitation and agency as presuppositions of meeting democratization does not require the level of detail in transcriptions that is used in CA (as described in Hepburn & Bolden 2017).

The analysis will focus on F2's actions trying to sum up, rephrase, and paraphrase children's proposals. This type of action is called *gist formulation*, which shifts the focus of a previous utterance, by "redeveloping its gist, making something explicit that was previously implicit in the prior utterance, or by making inferences about its presuppositions or implications" (Heritage 1985: 104). However, the analysis shows that, in the attempt of redeveloping the gist and making inferences, F2 provided several *upshot formulations*, which create additional "significance" to the content of the previous turns (Heritage & Watson 1980: 249), beyond their gist.

Ethics and consent procedures

The study has followed the key principles of ethics, distributing information sheets and consent forms, securing the emotional well-being, rights, dignity, and personal values of participants, especially children, and protecting their personal data, according to the ethical guidelines of the European Commission (GDPR 679/16). In particular, the promotion of the voices of children was one of its ethical pillars.

Results

This section presents seven extracts from both small group workshops and final plenaries during PL meeting 1 and, to a lesser extent, PL meeting 2. Extract 1 shows a case of effective facilitation of children's agency, prevalently based on minimal support. Extracts 2–4 show that the facilitator (F2) with the task of coordinating the children's participation frequently failed in facilitating their agency in small group workshops. F2 used stepwise transitions (Tiitinen & Lempiälä 2022) to connect to children's turns, but changing their meaning. Thus, while maintaining apparent collaborative relationships with children, F2 resisted their proposals without explicitly disagreeing with them, leaving out important children's cultural views, which got lost in the discussion. Extracts 5–7 show that, in final plenaries, F2 directly addressed her comments to children's proposals (Svennevig 2012), thus diminishing their agency by correcting or replacing their proposals.

However, the facilitator should not be understood as the determining "individual factor" in limiting children's agency. Rather, F2's actions reflect a mainstream conception of migrant children's marginalized positioning in society, based on the intersection of different factors.

Facilitation in small group workshops

During the small group workshops, in both PL meeting1 and PL meeting2, sometimes the facilitator (F2) supported the children's agency in making proposals. In Extract 1 (PL meeting1), the children propose plural approaches to religion and use of time to share information about children's cultures, showing their interest in exercising agency, rather than simply listening to teachers (turns 1, 3, 5). Facilitation is minimal but effective, including a minimal response, showing understanding and attention (turn 4) and two appreciations complementing the children (turns 2 and 6). These actions demonstrate confirmation of the children's proposals, inclusiveness, and attention to collaboration (Herd 2019).

Extract 1

1. CH1: But also that other religion that was not a Catholic school where I used to be and ehm, there I could follow my own faith and everyone say ehm, that can follow their own faith and then I had such an- the first, first master who ehm, then always had such a play, a colouring day and then the other time it was really about ehm, our faith that we had to share, that was taking turns and then we got a master where that we also got to colour, a day of colouring and a day of religion class.
2. F2: Hmm. Say, I like those ideas you all said.
3. CH2: I have an idea.
4. F2: Yes.
5. CH2: That the students with a migration background can spend a day like that um, um, learning about their culture instead of the teacher teaching religion, that the students with migration background.
6. F2: I think that's a very nice idea.

However, considering the range of potential facilitative actions (Herd 2019; Yeung 2004a) and the extent to which facilitation can empower autonomous choices (Raelin 2013; Shier 2001; Williamson & Barrat 2022), Extract 1 shows minimal and rather weak facilitative actions. Much more frequently, F2 provided upshot formulations, commenting on the children's proposals and suggesting different proposals.

In Extract 2 (PL meeting1), CH1 proposes the implementation of a specific website flagging an important value (turns 1 and 3) and CH2 actively collaborates with her suggesting the flag of a girl with headscarf (turns 5 and 7). In this collaborative formulation of a proposal, both children exercise agency. The only effective facilitative action is a minimal response, confirming reception of the proposal (turn 6). In addition, F2 provides several upshot formulations, which create additional significance to the content of the children's turns. They include a comment about the need to flag a general value, such as a long robe (turn 4), a suggestion that transforms the child's cultural value (a girl with the scarf) in something neutral (a boy with a skirt, turn 8), and the reference to a previous discussion about rules to counter bullying, deviating from the orientation to cultural values (turn 10). These facilitator's contributions transform the children's proposals, showing the facilitator's directiveness, rather than the children's agency. They change the cultural meaning expressed by CH2 in a neutral proposal. Through these actions, F2 is author of the proposal, rather than facilitator. F2 does not confirm the proposal, although she does not explicitly deny it. Particularly in turns 4 and 10, F2 uses stepwise transitions (Tiitinen & Lempiälä 2022), thus avoiding an explicit dissent with the children. CH1 seems to align with F2's suggestion (turn 9).

Extract 2

1. CH1: Because there's also so website where you have to make your own flag like that, of um, the things that you think are important um, the value.
2. K: Ah really?
3. R: And then you can order your own flag like that actually and then (?).
4. F2: Ge can still try to draw something just generally, a long, a long robe or a-
5. CH2: A headscarf ah yes.
6. F2: Yes.
7. CH2: A girl with a headscarf.
8. F2: Yes, indeed. Or a boy with a skirt could also be for example.
9. CH1: Or so one or the, the one, the one, that, those, those clothes that you mean
10. F2: that of um, ten rules or so against bullying.

In Extract 3 (PL meeting1), CH1 proposes a "day at school of all other cultures," suggesting their agency in expressing personal choices (turns 1 and 3). On the one hand, F2 appreciates the proposal and formulates its gist, both demonstrating responsiveness to it and opening new possibilities for the child's action by helping to develop it (turn 4). On the other hand, however, she suggests some activities (turns 2 and 8), collaborating to the construction of the proposal, rather than facilitating the child's elaboration, thus redefining the child's proposal, particularly through a stepwise transition (turn 8). CH1 tends to ignore the facilitator's suggestions, commenting on her own ability in proposing ideas and adding that it is also recognized by her teacher (turns 5 and 7). The child exercises agency in formulating proposals, despite the facilitator's attempt to orient her proposals.

Extract 3

1. CH1: Ah yes, I have it again. Um, so for example that you ehm, all can follow some kind of ehm, workshops actually eh, a day at school of all other cultures. And that you yourself can choose ah for example, I do find that interesting.
2. F2: Ah for instance, suppose you like to draw hen-

na, that you say you give a henna workshop and that children, for instance, can see how it works?
3. CH1: Or for example, or for example making Moroccan biscuits, allee.
4. F2: That is also nice, indeed, that day that there are various workshops, shall I write that down? Or yes, do. I'm going to set aside my water for a while. That's a nice idea though.
5. CH1: Um, I'm full of fun ideas.
6. ((laughter))
7. CH1: That's what my teacher says, those are my teacher's all the time.
8. F2: And such a typical folk dance, for example, that you can do from different countries

In Extract 4 (PL meeting2), CH1 recovers her previous proposal of a day in which all the students should stay at home for Ramadan, thus showing her agency (turns 1, 3, 6, and 8). F2 repeatedly changes this proposal through upshot formulations (turns 2, 4, and 12), although without openly rejecting it. Despite these upshot formulations, CH1 insists on providing an example (turns 13 and 15), once again showing her agency, which is followed by a short discussion. The community worker (CW) affirms a hierarchical position, by adding proposals (turns 5 and 29) and comments (turns 22 and 25). Particularly, in turn 29, she concludes that "we are all Belgian at the same time," dismissing the child's proposal about cultural diversity. F2 simply confirms.

Extract 4

1. CH1: I said if we then sit at home that those [then don't get lessons. That those then
2. F2: [indeed cooking something. Or learning about the Sugar Feast
3. CH1: why we celebrate it and what it actually is.
4. F2: yes. That is not the automatic reaction, which is logical at ten, like Oh no, now I should be in school. But that you indeed from where does that come? Maybe we can cook something together?
5. CW: or surprise them when they come back. Or yes I think something like that too. Because very often they also bring cookies and so on, right?
6. CH1: because they think this is not fair because during Christmas, we also stay at home, but during the Sugar Feast, they do go to school.
7. F2: maybe we can. Until when exactly does Ramadan run, do you know?
8. CH1: I don't, until a week after the Easter holidays, I think.
9. CW: the weekend after the Easter holidays
10. CH1: uh but
11. F2: we can think about that as an experiment, and that doesn't mean it should be done effectively. But that we say we group those ideas that we are saying now. How can Ramadan for example, specifically because it can also be other, uh, days. But let's say Ramadan. How can too, uh, that event make pupils indeed, from different backgrounds interact with it or something like that.
12. CH1: ((points to a piece of paper)) with these, that has already happened a bit. Now there are for example black chimney sweepers and that it is
13. F2: mhm.
14. CH1: but they are in fact white with a bit of black on them because they came down the chimney.
15. F2: so in fact this one we will, is already, especially. We can also say like, we say that less and we can put those away, right?
16. CH1: yes.
17. F2: that we do it like this.
18. CH1: mhm.
19. F2: [because there is a lot lying around.
20. CW: [I think that reading aloud in the home language is now also all the rage.
21. CH1: yes. During the read aloud week.
22. CW: I think in every school, uh,
23. F2: yes
24. CW: that is is very, that it is something that is being pushed very hard.
25. F2: so that's perhaps less innovative then.
26. CW: yes.
27. F2: if you have any additional ideas kike I said, we can also see it
28. CW: a small reflection, like here like, different flags with. My best friends are from education all. And my best friend also said she tries the different flags of all the cultures in the class. But then she has a nice thingy around it, but we are all Belgian at the same time as well.
29. F2: yes.

These extracts show that a directive form of facilitation downgrades the children's interest in cultural diversity. Moreover, in PL meeting2, the participation of the community worker (CW) contributed to reducing the children's agency in making proposals. However, despite the directive form of facilitation, the children were able to show their interest and exercise of agency in formulating proposals.

Facilitation in plenaries

In the final part of the final plenary in PL meeting1, the children reported on the workshop in which they participated. F2 frequently replaced their contributions with her own, interrupted them, explained, and commented on their contents. In this phase, F2 explicitly placed her contributions in relation to the children's previous talk (Svennevig 2012), rather than using stepwise transitions. F1 was busy with the coordination of the plenary; she tried to involve the children, but she also recognised F2 as the relevant interlocutor. Nevertheless, the children continued to show their exercise of agency, contributing to the democratic meeting discussions.

In Extract 5 (PL meeting 1), the children are directly addressed by F1 to report on the workshop. CH2 starts to talk, but F2 immediately tries to interrupt her (turn

3). However, CH2 continues to present the general organization of the proposals produced during the workshop, then she exemplifies some of them (turn 5), thus insisting in exercising agency. This time, F2 takes the floor to explain better what CH2 is saying, providing an upshot formulation that assesses the child's contribution as inadequate, thus reducing her autonomy in making proposals (turn 6). However, CH2 does not withdraw, expressing the proposal of more greenery at school and a vegetable garden in the playground (turn 7). CH1 collaborates with CH2, adding the proposal of encouraging swimming for Muslims with a headscarf (turn 8). F1 confirms reception with a minimal response, then she provides an interrogative formulation to make the point explicit (turn 9). CH2 completes the information about the playground. In this case, the children resist the attempt to reduce their autonomy in making proposals, continuing to exercise agency, thus claiming their rights to contribute to the PL meeting.

Extract 5

1. F1: Okay um, now I want um, M. and R. to speak huh and um, N. um, I can imagine that the other groups also have similar examples so we're going to um, we're going to um, supplement that later. Um, you guys are going (.) Yes, warm, what is a warm school huh, a warm school is- Should I help you? (Holding up the poster).
2. CH2: How do I feel good at school? If
3. F2: Can you hold for a moment? ((Holding up the poster)).
4. F1: Yes, please.
5. CH2: Like um, so we all had one of those papers like that and on each paper it says something about how we feel good at school and we also added a new thing, for example um, cooking together um, dishes from different countries. So we had for eh, for children with a migration background that maybe we can cook like that one time and that we can cook like that dishes of our own culture and that start on parents plus pupils and teachers-
6. F2: That was about it, that you said it would be nice if my mum, for example, could come along and that you could also bring other parents, but also together with my teachers, that you say that this is a time when we can be together with everyone, with that cooking.
7. CH2: And I also feel good at school if there would be so more, maybe more greenery in our school. We are taking care of that somewhere, we even have a vegetable garden, such a small vegetable garden in our, on our playground uhm, but we don't actually have really super much to do on our playground. So then we would love to have more greenery on the playground. And more swimming.
8. CH1: More swimming because there are sometimes um, for example um, Muslims who, who can't um, for example who can't go swimming along so easily easily, because they can't put on a swimming costume and can't go into the pool without their headscarf um, so um, so that then, for example, you can then at least go swimming along more in the school. Because there are now, for example, a more children that um, find swimming more difficult.
9. F1: Yes. You are, you, you, you, you mean that there, that those children would then have more chances to go swimming if that would have more chances to go swimming with you if that would happen in the framework of the school, because otherwise it is difficult?
10. CH2: Also, more playtime for everyone.

In Extract 6 (PL meeting 1), CH1 talks about her family's support of her "talent," showing her pride in being an agent. F1 asks for more details (turn 2), but F2 replaces CH1 in responding (turn 3). CH2 takes the floor adding information about her parents' support (turn 5), and CH1 takes another initiative showing her agency by associating help with family culture. Once again, the children actively collaborate in producing proposals. F1 provides minimal responses, encouraging the children to continue (turns 6 and 8). However, in turn 9, F2 corrects the contribution of CH1, stressing the importance of the connection between home and school. CH1 insists on the importance of help, but F2 adds another comment to complete the point (turn 12). As in Extract 6, F2's upshot formulation reduces the child's agency by dealing with her contribution as inadequate.

Extract 6

1. CH1: Um, my mum or dad can help me with the school by uhm, by encouraging for example with your talents, of saying yes, you have really talent do, talent for it and you should um, try that. And uhm, uhm, by sending you to the logo, for example, for something you find difficult.
2. F1: What, what's the last you with what?
3. F2: With speech therapy.
4. F1: Ah yes, okay.
5. CH2: Um, my mum and dad can help me with um, support by um, by al-, always being there for me and always supporting me.
6. F1: Hmm.
7. CH1: Um, they can also be there, which they can still um, by helping me with my culture, bringing food to school.
8. F1: Yes.
9. F2: To help actually with personal background in terms of culture or technicality, also in a way to bring to school, but then of course that should also be open along the school side. in that way also a bit of a connection between home and school.
10. F1: Ah yes. Okay.
11. CH1: uhm, uhm, and also by helping out a bit.
12. F2: To bring along.

In PL meeting2, CH1 was alone, and her participation in the plenary was more limited than in PL meeting1. Proposals were largely reported by F2 and other adult participants also contributed to marginalizing the child's agency. In Extract 7, F1 asks about CH1's proposal. CH1 responds that it was about respect, but F2 adds a more precise answer, talking of *mutual* respect (turn 3). For the third time, F2 deals with the child's contributions as inadequate, correcting it. F1 asks a new, more complex focused question on the meaning of respect (turn 4), and CH1's answer stresses respect for migrant-background people. F1 checks her own understanding (turn 7), which is confirmed by CH1, then she asks for further suggestions. F2, apologizing for the interruption, adds that respect is associated with safety, thus replacing CH1 and showing her inadequacy for the fourth time (turn 10). F1 acknowledges this explanation with a minimal response, and F2 continues, expanding on the topic, thus continuing to replace the child's potential contribution, affirming a hierarchical position and acting as a gatekeeper (turn 12). CH1 claims her agency, taking the initiative to add a comment on authenticity (turn 14), but F2 provides a new short comment, once again expanding on the topic (turn 15). In her turn, CH1 expands on F2's comment (turn 16). In this case, CH1 reacts to F2's comment by claiming her right to exercise agency by talking of her own proposals.

Extract 7

1. F1: Can I ask something, something, something extra, can I be sorry? Um, what was the first, sorry? What, what was that about?
2. CH1: Um. Respect, yes, yes.
3. F2: Respect for each other, so mutual respect.
4. F1: And you heard it um, when you say respect, is it about the teacher then going to have respect for students for students or is it also about um, students among themselves or what is it about, for, for you two?
5. CH1: Um, um, um, actually for example people with no migration background, that they then have respect for people who do have migr-, migration, migr- migration background.
6. ((laughter))
7. F1: What a word huh! Okay, so that's what it's about eh, mainly.
8. CH1: Yes.
9. F1: Okay. Um, and the next one was?
10. F2: And sorry to interrupt, but here the word safety with that respect was also important.
11. F1: Ah yes.
12. F2: So it's why, we put that together so somewhat that you well (.) you feel safe if you feel that there is respect for each other and then that they had put some with that.
13. F1: Okay.
14. CH1: Um, being who you are. That you can be yourself and wait huh.
15. F2: And not be a number huh.
16. CH1: Ah yes, at school, that, for example, you are not number one, number nine, you are number ten and- But that you are then addressed by your name.

These extracts show the extension of the directive form of facilitation to the final plenaries, reducing the children's agency in making proposals, in this case by addressing them directly. The children were able to show their exercise of agency in formulating proposals, but the plenary context and the more direct form of facilitation made their exercise of agency more difficult.

Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of Extracts 1–7 shows the facilitator's ways of dealing with migrant children's agency in making proposals in the PL meetings. Only in a few cases did F2 support the children's agency effectively, through a minimal form of facilitation, showing understanding, attention, and interest for children's proposals, through minimal responses and appreciations. Rarely, a moderate form of facilitation (Von Schneidemesser, Oppold & Stasiak 2023) opened new possibilities for the children's agency by making their proposals explicit through gist formulations. F2 rarely encouraged children's agency in making proposals (Raelin 2013) and responsibility for collaboration (Auvine et al 2002), despite the children's attempts to collaborate in the production of proposals. F2's action rarely showed empathy, openness, inclusiveness, support, suspension of judgment, unconditional positive regard, and attention to the new possibilities emerging in the interaction (Cranston et al. 2011; Fierro 2016; Hannon, 2020; Raelin 2006). The full range of possible facilitative actions (Herd 2019; Yeung 2004a) was not applied, and the children's empowerment (Shier 2001) was rarely pursued, so that the children could not work effectively with the adult participants in the PL meetings (Matthews 2003).

Rather, F2's handling of expertise (Moore 2012) was based on upshot formulations, which were much more frequent than gist formulations. Upshot formulations reduced the children's opportunities to express agency, thus they reduced their contribution to the democratic construction of proposals. F2 tried to orient and transform children's proposals commenting on them, suggesting new proposals, correcting children's proposals, and replacing children in the production of proposals, also supported by CW during the small group workshop in the second meeting. Thus, F2 did not contribute effectively to equalizing participants' responsibility for the meeting (Escobar 2019) because she did not promote an effective flow of children's proposals and children's influence on this flow (Raelin 2013). Children could not effectively contribute to changing the outcomes of the meetings because their alternative options, thus multiple positions in the meeting (Williamson & Barrat 2022), were not examined accurately. Particularly, children and adults' diverse perspectives on cultural issues got lost. F2 did not show willingness to air differences (Karpowitz, Raphael &

Hammond 2009) and to include different voices in the meetings (Rountree, Park & Richards 2024).

This analysis shows that *directive facilitation* (Dillard 2013) prevailed in the interactions with children. F2's actions produced an imbalance in the interaction because they tended to set adults' expectations and control the process of making proposals (Mroz, Yoerger & Allen 2018). In small group workshops, F2 adopted a form of mitigated directive facilitation, expressed through stepwise transitions (Tiitinen & Lempiälä 2022**)**. This action did not openly reject the children's proposals and did not explicitly invite children's compliance, but established a form of gatekeeping (Yeung 2004b) by redefining the children's proposals. During the plenaries, F2 frequently placed corrective contributions in direct relation to children's talk (Svennevig 2012). The facilitator of plenaries (F1) was more supportive of children's agency, asking for details and leaving the floor to them, but she did not limit F2's directive action.

Directive facilitation reduced the support of children's agency in two ways. First, the facilitator (and other adult participants) expected the promotion of integration rather than cultural diversity in education. Particularly during the small group workshops, the children exercised their agency by expressing their personal cultural trajectories (Holliday & Amadasi 2020), that is, using their personal experience to claim for more attention to cultural diversity in their school. However, their stress on cultural diversity was seen as a problem, although this problem was not made explicit and was dealt with using stepwise transitions. F2 (and CW) used upshot formulations to reduce the children's claim in favor of cultural diversity, developing the meanings of integration as neutralization of diversity. The facilitator's action reflected a general orientation of the PL organization to children's integration in the education system, rather than giving value to their diverse personal cultural trajectories. The dominant narrative of integration is used to underline migrant children's adaptation to the receiving cultural system (Amadasi & Ballestri 2025), blocking their narratives of personal cultural trajectories, thus ignoring their points of view about their experience (Kämpfe & Westphal 2016), and masking conditions of inequalities regarding their conditions (de Castro 2020).

Second, F2's way of handling expertise (Moore 2012) contributed to establishing a hierarchical interlacement of adults and children's proposals, rather than the primacy of children's proposals. This way of handling expertise seems to be based on the lack of awareness regarding the way of facilitating children's agency. F2's developmental approach based on age was particularly evident in the plenaries, where children's answers to F1 were treated by F2 as inadequate and incomplete, thus underscoring the children's exercise of agency. This approach was also evident in the lack of facilitation of children's contributions about other topics regarding their education, as reported by adults from another workshop, and by the weak effort in involving the children in the final meeting, where recommendations for educational policies were produced. Overall, migrant children's contributions were not taken seriously. Thus, an important weak point of facilitation was the underestimation of the challenging interaction between adults and children.

The conclusion is that the migrant children were victims of "epistemic injustice" (Schmidt 2024), that is, a form of internal exclusion that happens when some people (children) are believed and heard less than others (adults), based on meeting composition and facilitation, agenda setting, and choice of stakeholders. These outcomes show the importance of intersectionality, because the developmental conception of children, their migrant origins, and maybe their gender, concurred in marginalizing migrant children.

It is important to note, however, that these conditions did not discourage children from exercising agency. The children exercised agency during the PL meetings, particularly in small group workshops, but also during the plenary in PL meeting1. The children took the floor, spoke openly, and showed responsibility for participation and dialogic collaboration. They tried to promote change and influence meeting proposals. In some cases, they also claimed their agency when F2 or other adults did not support their proposals. The children were able to claim their agency simply because they were invited to do so, despite the obstacle of directive facilitation. This shows that, in situations in which migrant children are motivated to claim their needs, rights, and interests, their agency can be enhanced by the invitation to exercise it, and once invited, children can "resist" to challenging conditions in the interaction. This result highlights the effective consequence of involving children in deliberative processes, although it does not deny the strong limitations of their involvement.

Certainly, an important evolutionary task for facilitation of future (PL) meetings involving (migrant) children in deliberative processes, and an important objective of future studies, is finding ways to challenge the pressure of predefined adults' expectations in interactions between children and adults and the effects of intersectionality. This study contributed to showing that, in order to challenge this pressure and these effects, it is necessary to avoid developmental and cultural stereotypes and rather recognize and support children's exercise of agency and expressions of personal cultural trajectories. A data-based training, starting from real data on meeting interactions, can be an important opportunity for improving children's participation in deliberative democracy. However, an important limitation of this paper is that it examined a single case of children's involvement in mini-public meetings. Further studies might show different forms of facilitation of children's agency.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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