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# Learning to facilitate dialogue: On challenges and teachers' assessments of their own performance

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# Learning to facilitate dialogue: On challenges and teachers' assessments of their own performance


## Abstract

Research has long indicated that dialogic approaches have desirable effects in education, but it is also well-known that it can be a challenge for teachers to make the transition from the traditional teacher role to that of the facilitator. Based on a case study, this article investigates the successes and shortcomings of 29 teachers learning to facilitate classroom dialogue in teacher development programmes. The article analyses the trainees' written self-evaluations and the supervisors' written feedback to examine the extent and nature of the challenges encountered as well as the teachers' self-perceptions compared to the perceptions of the trained supervisors. The main findings were that the teachers encountered many challenges, especially when it came to adopting the role of a facilitator and supporting the students' reasoning and interaction. In addition, their own assessments of their performances were generally unreliable. Nonetheless, with supervised training, the teachers were quite successful in learning to facilitate philosophical dialogues.



**Keywords:** dialogic pedagogy; facilitation; teacher development programme; Philosophy with Children

## Introduction

Researchers and educators have championed and worked to implement dialogic pedagogy[i] in education for decades (Michaels and O'Connor 2015, 347), but this ideal is known to be difficult to realise in practice: even the teachers who are motivated and have been taught the principles of facilitating dialogue in the classroom struggle to make the transition from traditional to dialogic teaching (Sedova, Salamounova, and Svaricek 2014, 277). Therefore, more research on professional development in dialogic pedagogy is needed (e.g. Reznitskaya and Wilkinson 2015, 225; Hardman 2019, 151).

This study takes up the issue of using dialogue in education by examining the initial challenges faced by 29 teachers learning to facilitate dialogue in teacher development programmes on Philosophy with Children. Philosophy with Children is a form of highly dialogic pedagogy (Reznitskaya and Glina 2013; Topping and Trickey 2015; Smith 2017), and studying how teachers respond to training in this field can help us understand the challenges involved in making the transition to dialogic pedagogy in general.

In this study, teachers' self-evaluation reports and supervisors' written feedback were analysed to answer the following questions: Were the teachers able to learn to facilitate philosophical dialogue? What challenges did they encounter? And how did the teachers' reports compare to supervisors' evaluations? The results of the analysis showed that although the teachers were generally very successful in learning to facilitate dialogue, they struggled initially and were unable to identify the challenges themselves. These results were compared with previous research to see if they matched the general findings in the field and to consider possible explanations and implications.

### *Dialogic pedagogy*

There is no universally agreed upon definition of dialogic pedagogy and teaching (see, e.g., the recent discussion in Asterhan et al. 2020), and educational research in dialogue is a vast field covering both intra-personal dialogue (e.g. Markova 2005) and various form of interpersonal dialogues (see, e.g., Matusov 2018 for an overview). Dialogic classroom pedagogy is often contrasted with traditional instruction in the form of sequences of teacher-student exchanges characterised by "closed teacher questions, brief recall answers and minimal feedback that requires children to report someone else's thinking rather than to think for themselves" (Alexander 2008, 93). By contrast, dialogical approaches have been described as collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful (Alexander 2018b, 28) and have been said to require a pedagogy and classroom discourse that provide space for students' speech, listening, and thinking and support the possibility of students' ownership of the conversation (for overviews of different approaches to dialogic pedagogy, see, e.g., Nystrand et al. 2003, 138–9; Reznitskaya and Glina 2013, 49–50; Skidmore 2016; Alexander 2018a, 562–3).

Dialogical pedagogy has been endorsed due to its potential to support higher-order thinking skills (e.g. Nystrand 1997b; Wells 1999; Applebee et al. 2003; Alexander 2018b) and children's social skills (e.g. Alexander 2018a; García-Carrión et al. 2020), and many scholars also commend it for allowing students to have "real voices" in the classroom (Boyd and Markarian 2011, 529; see also Nystrand 1997a; Alexander 2008). However, empirical research has shown that school teaching practices are largely characterised by teacher-centred instruction (e.g. Alexander 2008; Applebee et al. 2003; Dysthe 1997; Lyle 2008; Nystrand et al. 2003; Smith et al. 2004).

Some scholars have suggested that this is because dialogic approaches are not sufficiently integrated in professional teacher education (Howe and Mercer 2017; Reznitskaya and Gregory 2013; Wilkinson et al. 2017), while others have pointed to organisational constraints, educational structures, or teacher beliefs (e.g. Haynes and Murris 2011; Hardman 2019; Hennessy and Davies 2019; Šeďová et al. 2020, 28–32). However, independently of these conversations in educational research, philosophical dialogue has been developed and advanced as a highly dialogic form of pedagogy for decades (with pioneering work done by, e.g., Martens 1979; Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan 1980; Matthews 1980).

### *Philosophical dialogues*

Philosophical dialogues are the core of activities in educational approaches known as Philosophy with Children, Philosophy for Children, P4C, communities of inquiries, and the like.[ii] There are differences between these approaches, but they generally share the dialogic ideals of being children centred, cooperative, and substantiated by reasoning (Välitalo, Juuso, and Sutinen 2016; Gregory, Haynes, and Murris 2017; Naji and Hashim 2017). To implement these ideals, facilitators focus on inviting all children to participate, including children's ideas, encouraging peer dialogue, and supporting cooperation while also helping the children develop argumentation and justification skills (e.g. Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan 1980 53–81; Costa-Carvalho and Mendonça 2017; Gasparatou 2017).

The main aim of Philosophy with Children is to create a community for creative thinking and for explaining and comparing ideas among peers rather than teaching children about philosophy. The children are usually seated in a (semi-)circle, and the facilitator supports the dialogue via questions, stories, and props, such as toys and pictures. The learning objectives can vary – in some cases, educators aim at social or cognitive skills (e.g.

Echeverrria and Hannam 2017; Topping and Trickey 2007; Worley and Worley 2019), and in other cases "philosophizing" is considered an aim in itself (Vansieleghem 2006).

There is no well-established link between Philosophy with Children, dialogic pedagogy, and teacher development, but previous studies have investigated teachers' experiences with philosophical dialogues (e.g. Yeazell 1981; Schleifer et al. 1995; Roberts 2006; McBryde 2013; Scholl 2014; Jensen 2020; Jensen 2021), and there have been theoretical discussions regarding the philosophical and/or pedagogic expertise needed to facilitate philosophical dialogues (Gazzard 2012; Splitter 2014; Turgeon 2012) as well as reflections on possible challenges in teaching Philosophy with Children (e.g. Cannon 1987, Knight and Collins 2014; Farahani 2014; Murris 2013). Yet, despite these inquiries into the intersection between Philosophy with Children and teacher training, very few empirical studies have investigated challenges in learning to facilitate philosophical dialogues with children. One of the studies compared video recordings of experienced teachers before and after they received training in dialogic pedagogy and found that there were substantial improvements in the teachers' facilitation of inquiry dialogue[iii] (Wilkinson et al. 2017). Another study involved a case study of teachers in training learning to facilitate philosophical dialogue and reported that they found it difficult to ask questions, conduct debates, and associate philosophy with curricula (Çayıra 2018).

### *Previous research on challenges in learning to facilitate dialogue*

Research has long indicated that teachers' transition from the traditional to the dialogical classroom poses challenges that cannot be explained by teachers' lack of motivation or knowledge. A recent overview of the research literature has identified three causes of such challenges: organisational constraints, teacher mindset, and the complexity of change

(Šeďová et al. 2020). Successful dialogic teaching requires structures that enable this kind of teaching (in terms of curriculum, school culture, time, etc.) and teachers who understand the principles of the dialogic approach and are favourably disposed towards it. However, as the overview also showed, "even when teachers agree with the main ideas of dialogic teaching, they find it difficult to adapt their behaviour and classroom practices accordingly" (Šeďová et al. 2020, 32). The study was motivated by the following question: Why is it difficult for teachers to apply dialogic ideals in practice?

Previous research has suggested that teachers' beliefs are likely an important factor. For instance, teachers may be sceptical of students' abilities, may think that the possession of the relevant facts is required before it is possible for students to meaningfully participate in dialogue (Resnick et al. 2018, 331), or may fear that dialogue will lead to interactional issues, such as conflict or limited participation (Michaels and O'Connor 2015, 351). Teachers' general beliefs regarding the purpose of school and teaching (Mercer, Hennessy, and Warwick 2019) or epistemological beliefs (Wilkinson et al. 2017; Hennessy and Davies 2019) may also contribute to the resistance to dialogic approaches. Similarly, researchers have argued that while habits enable the teacher to act intuitively by relying on well-rehearsed patterns of genre and interaction, they are also beyond conscious control and therefore difficult to change (Lefstein 2008).

In addition, school culture and conditions can also potentially bolster beliefs and habits. Organisational restraints, such as curriculum requirements, tests, time, student culture, and the like, are generally recognised as significant factors (Šeďová et al. 2020, 28–30) that impact teacher agency explicitly via requirements and implicitly via incentive structures and ideals (Lyle and Thomas-Williams 2012). For instance, teachers might dismiss dialogue because they associate disagreement with student misbehaviour (Resnik et al. 2018, 33).

Researchers have argued that there is no contradiction in principle between, for example, curriculum and the dialogic approach (Mercer, Hennessy, and Warwick 2019), but if the general conditions in a school are more aligned with the traditional teacher role, it is easy to imagine that such conditions will reinforce the beliefs and habits associated with that role, making the shift more challenging.

Another important perspective involves teachers' emotions and self-image (Geijsel and Meijers 2005). This perspective has attracted less attention in empirical research on dialogic pedagogy compared to teacher behaviour, but a recent study of eight teachers (Šeďová et al. 2020, 145–156) has emphasised the importance of this perspective and has identified several factors, such as ideals, insecurities, and motivations, that are likely lie behind the challenges. The study identifies four types of teachers in a dialogic teacher development program: the self-confident teacher who is not keen on being corrected, the eager teacher who aims to improve, the relaxed teacher who is focused on ease and enjoyment, and the despondent teacher who feels insecure and is self-depreciating. The study suggests that there is a complex causal connection between teacher type and the teachers' capacity to learn dialogic educational approaches and that negative emotions (such as anger, anxiety, and disappointment) are the most important catalyst for change (Šeďová et al. 2020, 155) because such emotions motivate teachers to modify their thinking and behaviour. By contrast, other researchers have argued that teachers need "safe spaces" to change classroom dynamics (Resnick et al. 2018, 33).

Researchers have also suggested that some teachers actually prefer the traditional classroom power structure, in which "test questions" (e.g. Nystrand 1997b) place students at a disadvantage when it comes to risk distribution: "In contrast, dialogic teaching is predicated on ceding to students a degree of control of both content and behaviour, and it therefore

transfers at least some of the risk of public exposure back to the teacher, and not all teachers are happy with either scenario" (Alexander 2018a, 591). Therefore, teachers may be reluctant to let go of control and may prefer to play it safe, while, in fact, negative emotions, such as insecurity, could be the most effective driver of change.

### *A case study of teachers in a training programme*

This article examines teachers' success in a specific kind of teacher development programme and reports on the teachers' initial challenges to do with facilitating philosophical dialogue and their possibilities of overcoming these challenges. First, the article describes the training programme and how data was collected and analysed. Then,  it presents the results of the analysis, revealing a number of challenges faced by the teachers, but also that challenges can be overcome. In the discussion that follow, these results are compared with findings from other recent studies and consider potential explanations and implications.

## Methods and materials

The following sections describe the study context, study design, the kinds of data collected, and the strategy behind the qualitative analysis.

### *Philosophy with children in the project Philosophy in Schools*

Philosophy with Children has been known and practiced in the Danish education system for decades (e.g. Naji 2017). The teacher training studied in this article was offered by the Philosophy in Schools project (at University of Southern Denmark), which has participated in research, development, education, and outreach related to philosophical dialogues since 2017.

The training was part of teacher development programmes, which also generated the data for our research. Teaching and supervision in the programmes were provided by three experienced facilitators in philosophical dialogue in schools (of whom one is author of the present article). All supervisors were certified by the teacher development programme offered by The Philosophy Foundation (London, UK), a programme that is almost identical to the one investigated in the present case study.

As is the case internationally, the Philosophy with Children field in Denmark encompasses various approaches. While the Philosophy in Schools project involves ideals that are common in Philosophy with Children and in dialogic pedagogy more broadly (e.g. that dialogue should be collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful; see Alexander 2018b, 28), the project is also defined by more specific ideals. For the analysis here, it is especially relevant to stress the ideal of the facilitator as a strong presence in terms of procedure but "absent" when it comes to content and direction (Worley 2016). This means, for instance, that it is important that the facilitator does not take part in the dialogue, even in subtle ways, such as paraphrasing students' ideas, as this might reinforce the classical teacher role as an authority on truth (cf., e.g., Oyler 2015 for a recent, alternative view on paraphrasing as an ideal).

This and the other ideals of the programme and of the project in general are reflected in the criteria that determine whether a participant meets the standards required to lead philosophical dialogues with children.

### *Description of the studied training programmes*

I collected the data for this study from two identical teacher development programmes (2018–2019 and 2019–2020) for a total of 31 participants (mostly teachers, but also a few social

educators) from 12 municipal schools in [city], Denmark. The participants were teaching in primary and lower secondary schools and were selected by local school administrations based on interest and professional profile. The first programme had two male and 14 female participants, and the second had three male and 12 female participants. The participants' age and experiences were similar to those of the schools in the area. The participants taught in grade 1–5, 6–8, or/and 9–11 and across subjects.

The development programmes involved a two-day intensive introductory course followed by supervised training activities, self-evaluation, and feedback in the participants' schools. The introductory courses involved theoretical background as well as hands-on exercises on "talk moves" (Michaels and O'Connor 2015) and other tools in facilitating philosophical dialogue. Completing the course was a requirement for enrolling in the practical training activities. Some participants were unable to complete all the activities in the training programme (due to field trips, illness, etc.), but 23 completed activities (a), (c) and (f), which constituted the minimum requirement for being ready for the final evaluation (see Table 1). The rest dropped out of the programmes for reasons such as change of job, indefinite sick leave, or workload. The participants completed the activities according to their own schedule, normally within a five-month time span.

| **Activities in the training programmes** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (a) Trainee leads five sessions of philosophical dialogue in classes | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** |
| (b) Trainee colleague observes the sessions and provides peer feedback | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** |
| (c) Trainee fills out a written self-evaluation form after each session | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** |
| (d) Supervisor observes first and last sessions | **X** | | | | **X** |
| (e) Supervisor provides written feedback on each self-evaluation form | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (f) Trainee observes five sessions run by an experienced facilitator | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** |
| (g) Trainee observes and provides feedback to trainee colleague | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** | **X** |

*Table 1.* Overview of the training programmes' requirements after the introductory course. Activity (a) consisted of sessions of 45–60 minutes (including a philosophical dialogue, a warm-up game, and an end game). The analysis focuses on the data (marked with a grey background) from the first written self-evaluation forms and from supervisors' written feedback in activities (c) and (e) and from the final feedback from activity (e) was recorded.

Leading philosophical-dialogue sessions was an essential part of the individual training programme. A supervisor observed a trainee's first and fifth sessions and provided written feedback on the trainee's self-evaluation form. The self-evaluation form contained predefined questions regarding all aspects of the session, and the trainee was instructed to use it as a tool for evaluation and reflection meant to support the training process. When providing feedback, the supervisor commented on the trainee's reflections, evaluated the session, and offered advice on facilitation and on what to prioritise in the training sessions to come. The supervisor's final feedback included an assessment of whether the trainee demonstrated the necessary skills for leading philosophical dialogues with children. In most cases, this evaluation involved written comments on the trainee's fifth self-evaluation, but in some cases, it was presented at a personal meeting if the trainee preferred this.

### ***Study design and data collection***

The design of the present study was conceived after the training programmes had ended. The study consisted of a retrospective qualitative analysis of the contents of the self-evaluation and feedback forms completed by the trainees and the supervisors. The data for the research

question investigating whether the teachers were able to learn to facilitate dialogue were collected from the forms for the fifth (and final) sessions. The data for the research questions about challenges and ability to self-assess were collected from the forms for the trainees' first sessions (see Table 1). Before the analysis, information that could identify a trainee or a supervisor to counteract confirmation bias was removed.

The study design and data collection is in compliance with institutional and national rules regarding research involving humans and data management under the Danish Data Protection Regulation (Danish Ministry of Justice 2018).

***Coding of data and analysis***

All anonymised self-evaluation and feedback forms were coded by hand and the dataset was systematically analysed twice (the second time more than six months after the first cycle) to ensure that all data were appropriately coded according to the research questions about challenges, ability to self-assess and the final evaluations. A deductive concept-driven approach to coding was employed based on a predefined set of codes. These codes were informed by prior knowledge of quality criteria of Philosophy with Children and reflected the four core ideals in the Philosophy in Schools project, ideals that also underpinned the development programmes, the training, and the self-evaluation form.

These ideals are common in Philosophy with Children and research on dialogic pedagogy. The first ideal, A, concerns the teacher's role as a facilitator rather than a traditional teacher in control of and with authority over content (see, e.g., Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan 1980, 82–101; Reznitskaya 2012, 447; Worley 2015, Worley 2016). The second ideal, B, refers to the facilitator supporting student reasoning by inviting all students to participate and asking for examples and justifications (see, e.g., Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan

1980, 102–124; Reznitskaya 2012, 447; Worley 2011, 29–45). The third ideal, C, deals with the support of peer interaction and community by, for instance, connecting ideas (Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan 1980, 124–128; Reznitskaya 2012, 447; Worley 2011, 25–28). The final ideal, D, concerns common classroom management.

| **Codes for core ideals** | **Examples of typical coding criteria** |
|---|---|
| A: Adopting the role of a facilitator rather than a traditional teacher | *The trainee should*<br>• not be an authority on truth<br>• not ask leading questions<br>• not give correctness feedback<br>• not paraphrase or rephrase<br>• not be the focal point of the group<br>• not press the pace of the dialogue or add content<br>• not take part in the dialogue |
| B: Supporting the students' reasoning | *The trainee should*<br>• make sure that everyone is invited to participate<br>• pick up on emergent questions and concepts<br>• ask for reasons, examples, and elaborations<br>• handle factual and hypothetical discussions |
| C: Supporting peer interaction | *The trainee should*<br>• use "talk time" to allow peer discussion<br>• encourage interchanges<br>• pose emergent questions back to the group<br>• provide the opportunity to respond to comments |
| D: Handling classroom management | *The trainee should*<br>• make the rules for activities clear (including games)<br>• make sure that the dialogue rules are respected (ball rules, respect, silence, and hands down) |

*Table 2.* Overview of the ideals and the typical coding criteria.

*Recording of results from the final evaluations*

The forms from the fifth and final session (see Table 2) provided the basis for registering whether the final evaluation was positive or not – that is, whether the basic requirements for facilitating philosophical dialogue were met. As mentioned earlier, in some cases, the feedback on the fifth session was provided at a meeting rather than in writing. In these cases, the assigned supervisor later provided the information needed for the record.

*Analysis of self-evaluations and feedback*

To address the question of challenges and reliability of self-assessment, the self-evaluation and feedback forms were coded from the first session after the introductory courses (see Table 1) according to the four predefined categories (see Table 2). The coding of the data from the forms was based on whether the trainees (usually after consulting with a trainee colleague) indicated that they were challenged trying to meet quality standards regarding the four ideals (A, B, C and D). The supervisors' feedback was coded to identify instances when they believed the trainees did not meet the quality standards of the four ideals.

After this, the qualitative data was categorised according to the core ideals (see Table 2). It was recorded (1) how often the trainees reported in their self-evaluations that they were challenged by an ideal and (2) how many examples of deviances from ideals the supervisors noted in their feedback on the trainees' self-evaluation reports from the first supervised session. This made it possible to compare the teachers' own experiences of challenges and supervisors' evaluations of these challenges.

## Results

The main results of the data analyses and comparisons were as follows: (1) almost all the teachers were challenged when they first started facilitating philosophical dialogue, and (2) most teachers and their peers underestimated many shortcomings in their facilitation techniques; however, (3) they sometimes identified the same challenges as the supervisors, and (4) all but one of the teachers who completed the programmes learned to facilitate philosophical dialogue in a way that sufficiently realised the four core ideals.

### *The final evaluation*

Of the 31 participants who entered the development programmes, 29 continued in the training programmes after the introductory courses. The participants could opt out for whatever reason, and the fact that they did not indicates that the participants were motivated at least to some degree. Twenty-three participants completed the training, and all but one received a positive final evaluation by the supervisor, having met the programme's facilitation standards after concluding the training.

### *The challenges identified in early self-evaluations and feedback*

According to the data, the supervisors assessed that most trainees found it challenging to facilitate at a sufficiently high level when first leading philosophical dialogues after the introductory course. The biggest challenge was refraining from adopting the traditional teacher role (row A in Table 3), while classroom management was generally much less of an issue (row D in Table 4). However, it should be noted that there are more ways to fall short of ideal A (compared to the other ideals; see Table 2), which means that the distribution does not

in itself show that this ideal was the most difficult challenge, even if it was the most frequently encountered and thus the most visible one.

| Ideals | 2018 trainees | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 2019 trainees | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
| A. Adopting the facilitator's role | | | 2 | 1 | | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 * * | 4 * | 1 | 1 | 2 | | 2 * | 1 * | 4 * | 2 | 1 | | 5 | 2 * | 3 | 4 | 3 * | | 3 * |
| B. Supporting the students' reasoning | 1 | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 2 | 2 | | 1 | 2 | | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | |
| C. Supporting peer interaction | | | 1 | | 1 | 1 * | 1 | | 1 | | 1 * | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 2 * | | | 1 * | | 1 | 1 * | 1 | | 1 | 1 * | 2 * | |
| D. Classroom management | | | | | | | * | | 1 | | | | | | | | | 2 * | | 1 | | 1 * | | | | 1 | | 1 | 1 |

*Table 3*. Distribution of the types and number of variations of specific kinds of challenges identified by supervisors in relation to categories A–D as noted in first feedback to the 2018 and 2019 trainees (see Table 2). The * denotes cases when the trainees themselves mentioned a challenge in the self-evaluation forms (no trainee mentioned more than one in each category). Note that there were only data from 29 participants out of the 31 that entered the two training programmes. Two trainees left the programme before being observed in a session in 2019.

| Core ideals | Representative examples from participants' self-evaluation forms |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| A: Adopting the role of a facilitator rather than a classical teacher | So I have to work on getting better at just asking in-depth questions and still accepting if the child does not say exactly what I think with the words I would have chosen :-) (2-2019)<br><br>I made an effort to ask open-ended questions and not put words in their mouth – but I have been a teacher for almost 20 years now, and this is difficult for me. I could clearly feel my urge for some kind of 'control'. (3-2019) |
| B: Supporting the students' reasoning | [no examples found] |
| C: Supporting peer interaction | A lot of the time, though, they talked to me, but I had the impression that they were also listening to each other. (9-2018) |
| D: Handling classroom management | I had my colleague with me as an observer, and we generally agreed on the challenges of the session and how I tackled them. We primarily focused our talk around the turmoil that was in the session and how it affected the philosophical conversation. (7- 2018) |

*Table 4*. Examples of the challenges identified by the trainees in their self-evaluation forms after the first session. Quotations have been translated by the author.

| Core ideal | Representative examples of supervisors' feedback |
|---|---|
| A: Adopting the role of a facilitator rather than a classical teacher | *Trainee:* […] the discussion evolved a lot from the first target question. I found that I got to expand the conversation and facilitate good target questions, which gave an extra dimension to the first target question.<br><br>*Supervisor's comment:* Agree that it ended in a good place. You are also good at remembering to ask "why?" if they do not explain themselves. However, you must make sure that it is not you who guides the students to "end up in a good place." I |

| | |
|---|---|
| | found that it was often very clear what you wanted them to answer (in addition to the wording "is it morally right to hit and kick?", you very often reply with "but…", which they may perceive as their answer not being what you were looking for). (12-2018) |
| B: Supporting the students' reasoning | *Supervisor's comment:* Remember to ask students to elaborate on their ideas if they do not do it themselves (use, e.g., "why?", "Would you like to say more?", "Do you want to elaborate on what you mean by x?"). In this way, you help the students to go in depth in relation to what they say. (4-2019) |
| C: Supporting peer interaction | *Trainee:* […] They were unable to talk in pairs […] it was not possible for me to get the discussion going.<br><br>*Supervisor's comment:* […] Regarding having to talk in pairs, I hope it will be easier next time when there are fewer adults. The children did not talk so much to each other during the dialogue, maybe you can help it along by asking "does anyone have anything to say to what x said?" when you get the teddy bear back from x. The children are thus forced to listen if they want to say something. (6-2018) |
| D: Classroom management | *Trainee:* I would have liked to have been more forceful/been clearer about the importance of being respectful of each other. That way, it would hopefully have been easier for me and the students to concentrate on listening and responding.<br><br>*Supervisor:* […] It's perfectly okay to pause the session to enforce the rules. (6-2019) |

| | |
| --- | --- |

*Table 5*. Examples from the self-evaluation forms of the challenges identified by the supervisors (and in two cases also by the trainee) after the first session. Quotations have been translated by the author.

### *Comparison between self-evaluation and supervisor feedback*

The analysis also showed that there was only a limited correlation between the trainees' self-evaluations and the supervisor's assessments. In some cases, a trainee would mention a perceived challenge (marked with * in Table 3) that would correspond with the supervisor's observation, but in one case, a trainee reported a perceived challenge that the supervisor did not. And, in many cases, the supervisors registered challenges that the trainees did not mention in the self-evaluations (see also the examples in Table 5). It should be noted that the trainees' self-evaluations were usually written after consultation with peer trainees (who had also observed the session) so that the self-evaluations could incorporate feedback on the challenges noticed by the colleagues. Accordingly, a challenge that was not mentioned in the form could indicate that it was noticed neither by the trainee nor by the colleague (or at least was not brought up in the peer-feedback conversation after the session).

The challenges identified by the trainees (and/or peers) were related to ideals A, C, and D. There were no mentions of perceived challenges in relation to B. Table 4 provides examples from trainees' self-evaluation forms.

## Discussion

The study mapped the initial pedagogical challenges faced by teachers training to facilitate philosophical dialogue, the distribution of the challenges, and the discrepancy between the

supervisors' observations and the trainees' self-evaluations. The main points can be summarised as follows:

- The participants learned to facilitate philosophical dialogue. In fact, almost everyone who completed the training was able to realise the ideals. Those who left the programmes before completing it did so for reasons unrelated to the programmes' contents.
- The participants entered the training programmes feeling motivated, with organisational support, and with knowledge about facilitation, yet they were challenged at first and had difficulties realising the ideals of the facilitator's role, supporting students' thinking and peer interaction, and (to a lesser degree) classroom management.
- The correlation between the participants' and supervisors' assessments was low. Despite consulting with a peer trainee and observer, the participants often did not pick up on the challenges noticed by the supervisors, and, in one case, they indicated challenges that the supervisor did not.

Why was it difficult to realise the dialogic ideals despite having motivation, opportunity, and knowledge? And why were the trainees unable to report certain challenges even with the aid of their peers? The following discussion indicates possible explanations by drawing on findings from previous studies. The article concludes with considering the implications of the study and summarising the main points.

### *Previous studies on the nature of challenges*

Unfortunately, there is limited empirical research on the challenges related to learning to facilitate philosophical dialogue. However, the findings from a recent study in Turkey

correspond well with the findings from this study. The Turkish study was based on interviews with trainees in teacher education (Çayıra 2018) and described the challenges perceived in learning to facilitate Philosophy with Children. The informants mentioned three difficulties regarding facilitation: asking unbiased questions, conducting a debate in which children discuss each other's ideas (i.e. peer interaction versus merely talking to the teacher), and helping deepen and continue the debate (Çayıra 2018, 177). These findings correspond, with this study's categories A (facilitator role), B, and C (supporting reasoning and interaction).

Research on dialogic pedagogy and teaching has produced similar findings. A study from the Czech Republic examined the teachers who endorsed dialogic ideals while only providing "embryonic forms of dialogic teaching" (Sedova, Salamounova, and Svaricek 2014). The study found two general shortcomings: first, the teachers' inability to support classroom dialogue in which students would engage with each other's ideas (referred to as "lack of rational argument"; Sedova, Salamounova, and Svaricek 2014, 279); second, the teachers' failure to support the students' reasoning, engaging, instead, in correcting the students to dismiss what the teachers considered to be wrong answers (but were, in fact, misunderstandings due to "semantic noise"; Sedova, Salamounova, and Svaricek 2014, 280). These challenges correspond with the present study's categories C (interaction), B (reasoning) and A (facilitator role).

In short, it is difficult for teachers to realise the dialogic ideals even when they understand and support them. The present study's design and data cannot provide answers as to why this is so, but previous theoretical and empirical research has indicated possible explanations.

### *Explaining the findings of the present study*

The explanations proposed by previous studies paint a complex picture of the possible causes of the challenges. Nevertheless, these explanations can help shed light on the main results of the present study and explain why dialogic ideals are difficult to realise. Most likely, a combination of various factors, such as beliefs, habits, ideals, emotions, and organisational structures, works against efforts to adopt a more dialogic classroom culture when it comes to philosophical dialogues.

However, while these are good reasons for finding dialogic ideals challenging to realise, it is not clear that these reasons also explain another main finding in this study: namely, that compared to the supervisors' evaluations, the trainees seemed largely unaware of the fact that they failed to realise the ideals of facilitation and supporting students' thinking and interaction.

The scarce empirical research on teacher experiences (Sedova, Salamounova, and Svaricek 2014; Çayıra 2018) has shown that teachers can articulate their challenges in retrospect but struggle to identify them while undergoing training. It may be important to study this phenomenon further as it arguably adds to the complexity and difficulty of making the transition from the role of the traditional teacher to that of the facilitator of philosophical (or other kinds of) dialogue in the classroom. Given that the third main finding of the present study is that teachers can, in fact, overcome the challenges and realise dialogic ideals, it would be highly relevant to know more about teachers' experiences and self-evaluations in the transition process.

### *Implications of the present study*

In accordance with previous studies, the findings from the present study confirm the importance of supervised training (e.g. Reznitskaya and Wilkinson 2015, 224). The data clearly indicated that training is needed to acquire the facilitation skills needed to realise dialogic ideals. All but one of the trainees received feedback to the effect that they needed to change something in their facilitation techniques, and five or more shortcomings were noted for 10 out of the 29 trainees. While receiving a positive final evaluation is compatible with minor departures from the ideals, facilitating in a way that steers the content of the dialogue (A) or fails to support students' reasoning (B) will automatically entail a negative final evaluation.

The first supervised facilitation sessions after the course demonstrated that the trainees did not possess the level of expertise needed to realise the dialogic ideals. Therefore, the fact that almost all trainees were successful in the end means that the supervised training and feedback were likely instrumental in the teachers learning to facilitate philosophical dialogues with children and that unsupported self-evaluations or peer evaluations would most likely be insufficient. Previous research has indicated that further resources, such as video recordings of sessions (Hennessy and Davies 2019, 245), would also be worth exploring in future studies.

Another future line of research could focus on better understanding teacher experiences of challenges. Previous research has gathered data on teacher behaviour and changes after training, but few studies have provided insight into how the teachers see themselves and what kinds of challenges they experience. Most likely, such data are already being generated for other purposes, such as supervision in a training programme (as in our

case) or revisions of teacher training programs (see, e.g., Wilkinson et al. 2017, 78); these date could be highly relevant to shed more light on teachers' experiences and challenges.

The present study has a number of limitations. First, it examined one specific kind of development programme with specific facilitation standards and ideals, which means that it is not clear to what extent the findings are generalisable. Second, it is not ideal that the author of this study was involved in the training programmes as one of three supervisors, as this double role can affect researcher objectivity. Finally, interviews with the trainees could have helped to better understand the nature of the challenges and their possible causes. However, given that research on the challenges that teachers experience while learning to facilitate dialogue is so scarce, this study is an important first step that points out meaningful directions for future research.

### *Concluding remarks*

This study confirmed that the transition from the traditional teacher role to that of the facilitator is very challenging even when teachers have adequate knowledge and motivation. The challenges can be explained by the complex influences of beliefs, habits, ideals, emotions, risk aversion, and organisational conditions. Given these influences, it would, in fact, be more surprising if teachers made this transition with ease. Nevertheless, the study found that despite the challenges, almost all participants who completed the supervised training were capable of realising the ideals related to facilitating philosophical dialogue with children. The study also revealed something that had not been identified or discussed in previous research, namely that the trainees and their peers generally could not reliably identify their own challenges or shortcomings in the learning process. This could be an

important factor in explaining why motivation, knowledge, and opportunity are not sufficient for making a successful transition to the facilitator role.

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available and have not been translated into English. However, they are available from the author upon request.

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[i] This article uses the term “dialogic pedagogy” as a shorthand for a group of related approaches, such as dialogic pedagogy, dialogic teaching, and accountable talk. These approaches have different theoretical origins and are not completely interchangeable, but they are sufficiently alike (for a similar view, see Resnick, Asterhan, and Clarke 2015, 3).

[ii] This article uses the term “Philosophy with Children” as a shorthand for these kinds of activities despite the variations and differences among them.

[iii] Wilkinson et al. 2017 referred to the intervention as “inquiry dialogue” rather than “philosophical dialogue,” but the findings are included here because the literature references and the description of the educational environment show that the dialogue style and training are informed by the Philosophy with Children approach.