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The Social Construction of Gender in Adult-Children Interactions and Narratives at Preschool, Primary and Middle school

Elisa Rossi*

Abstract: The social construction of gender beyond categorisations and stereotyped representations in adult-children interactions and narratives, and its interplay with the specific forms displayed by the interactions, is an interesting and new field for scholars, teachers, experts, and parents, increasingly invoked locally, nationally and internationally to reduce and prevent gender inequalities, prejudices, discrimination, and violence. This paper aims to analyse and understand the forms of communication which can be most effective in opposing stereotypes, in challenging narratives of a binary and hierarchical gender order, and in introducing counter-narratives based on a multiple, hybrid, equal and fluid gender order. Data were collected through audio- and video-recording in preschools, primary and middle schools in Northern Italy, during extracurricular activities and workshops proposed by an educator, a teacher, or a trainer for discussions on topics such as toys, sports, jobs, gender differences, etc. The analysis highlighted the ways in which dialogic facilitation can be productive both in bringing out children's gender stereotypes and in promoting their agency for the co-construction of alternative narratives, but also situations where dialogic facilitation seems to be more ambivalent and to 'slip into' an educational form in which the adult's role and perspective orient or direct children's learning and thinking.

Keywords: schools, children, interactions, gender, narratives

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Gender: processes of social construction and socialisation

Common sense and some streams of study still often interpret and theorise on gender from an essentialist perspective: they conceive it both as a 'natural' characteristic of individuals, a synonym or as the 'destiny' of sex differences, they perpetuate a heteronormative and heteropatriarchal narrative, which 'normalizes' gender as binary and hierarchical, and 'naturalises' the alleged link between two sexes, two genders, and heterosexuality.

Taking a *gender studies* approach (Connell, 2009; Lorber, 1994; Piccone Stella & Saraceno, 1996; Ruspini, 2009), this paper instead regards gender as: 1) the product of a *social construction* of the biological sexes and the natural differences between men and women, in terms of different attitudes, behaviour, expectations, values, norms, identities, roles, and relationships; 2) something individuals (are) *socialised into* from birth.

Gender social construction and socialisation are ongoing processes which take place in communications, social interactions, discourses, and narratives.

For some leading scholars (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2009; Lorber, 1994; Piccone Stella & Saraceno, 1996) no fixed biological basis exists for the social processes connected to gender; the 'biological' sexes are constructed through gender interpretations and expectations, and the 'difference and binary approach' should leave room for a relational and interactional approach. Risman (2004) conceptualises gender as a *social structure*, i.e. a structure of inequality which is constructed and embedded in the institutional, individual, and interactional levels of every society, and which intersects with other structures of inequality (race, class, sexuality), while for Connell (2009), the social structure of gender: a) is a set of lasting and widespread patterns, norms, values, expectations, discourses and narratives for identities and relationships, construed in communication in any society in its different historical and political circumstances; b) determines a peculiar *gender order*, i.e. a specific system of relationships: traditional (patriarchal) patterns of binary identities and hierarchical relationships between men and women can still be considered hegemonic, but they are also challenged by multiple, hybrid, fluid, and democratic patterns.

Gender is also an *ongoing accomplishment*, displayed, performed, 'done' in social situations and everyday interactions (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1977; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In social interactions, individuals under the influence (in terms of constraints and opportunities) of the social structure can either construct and reproduce the hegemonic meaning of gender differences, or they can *negotiate*, adapt and 'redo', deconstruct and 'undo', reject and try to subvert them (Butler, 2004; Connell, 2009; Connell, 2010; Deutsch, 2007; Lorber, 2005; Risman, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 2009): so, individuals can challenge *locally and situationally* the stereotyped representations of the

traditional gender order, create new and alternative narratives, maybe modify attitudes and practices.

Problematizing the essentialist theories of gender socialisation as passive interiorisation both of complementary roles, values and expectations provided by the adult culture (Parsons, 1951) and of two different styles in language and conflict learned in same-sex groups of children (Tannen, 1990), gender socialisation is interpreted as a process of meaning negotiation, in which individuals, actively and throughout their lives, construct and express their identities in relationships and interactions (Connell, 2009; Crespi, 2008). Children and adolescents observe and learn the way gender is created and expected in society; however, they can do it *competently* through their *agency*, actively participating in interactions and in their own socialisation process, making choices among different courses of action: so, for example, in everyday interactions, at school, they can confirm gender differences through 'border work', or ignore them, or they can 'pass through' and 'play with them' (Goodwin, 2011; Thorne, 1993). For a long time now, the 'new' sociology of childhood (Baraldi, 2009; Baraldi, Maggioni & Mittica, 2003; Corsaro, 2012; James, 2009; James & James, 2004; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Satta, 2012) has conceived children as *co-constructors of meaning* and *competent social agents* in communication processes and through 'interpretive reproduction'.

Children are able: 1) to participate actively in social interactions and to express themselves through opinions, experiences, feelings, etc.; 2) to act out their agency in constructing and negotiating social meaning, patterns, norms, expectations, and in constructing and expressing their identities; 3) to create and participate in their own unique peer cultures, by appropriating, interpreting and reinventing information from adults, being affected by the social structure and the cultures of the societies in which they live.

Adult-children interactions may therefore be relevant to the processes of gender construction and socialisation: they can downgrade adults' epistemic authority, empower children and support their agency in constructing knowledge and negotiating meaning, actions, and power, towards a multiple, hybrid, equal and fluid gender culture; they can also help in tackling children's and adults' gender stereotypes and prejudices in narratives. In a system of interactions, it's important to understand the ways in which the gender order is constructed and narrated, and their consequences for children's participation and socialisation.

Education and monologue

Assuming a systemic and constructivist approach, *communication* is a fundamental process: participants understand their interlocutors' communi-

cative actions, construct and coordinate social meaning, cultural forms, and orientations towards social phenomenon (Pearce, 1989). Moreover, society is primarily made up of social systems (family, school, politics, economy, religion, etc.), which are based upon communication networks (Luhmann, 1984). These networks are guided by specific *forms of communication* and *patterns of expectations*, concerning (Baraldi, 2012): a) their guiding values for the treatment of contents of communication; b) the participants' positioning (as standardised roles, unique persons or in a hierarchy); c) their expected results (cognitive, normative, or affective).

Education in schools, for example, is a form of communication normally interpreted as *instruction* and finalised towards children's learning and oriented to: a) the value of correctness (correct/incorrect distinction); b) the hierarchical positioning of roles (teacher/student) with expected standardised and depersonalised performances; c) expected cognitive (and normative) results (Luhmann & Schorr, 1979). These patterns of expectations, which allow for the ongoing evaluation of children's contributions and role performances as correct or incorrect, can be conceived as *cultural presuppositions* of education, and the specific verbal and nonverbal signs during interactions are *contextualisation cues* for these presuppositions (Gumperz, 1992). For example, the educational goals in schools are still frequently achieved through *didactic triplets*, in particular the sequence 'Initiation-Reply-Evaluation' or 'Initiation-Response-Follow up' (Fele & Paoletti, 2003; McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), and broadly through monologues. The presuppositions of *monologues* are the control of the interlocutors' participation, a lack of listening relating to different perspectives, an absence of sensitivity for feelings and thoughts, and a hierarchical positioning associated with a right-wrong distinction: in sum, the imposition of one's own perspective on the others' (Bohm, 1996; Littlejohn & Domenici, 2001; Wadensjö, 1998). In schools, specifically, educational monologues are one-sided discussions in which 'the expert', i.e. the teacher, who holds the epistemic authority, displays actions such as explanations, instructions, directives and evaluations towards 'the recipients', i.e. the students (Anderson & Ciliberti, 2002).

Dialogue and facilitation

The opposite of a monologue, namely a *dialogue*, is a form of interaction which is characterised by different cultural presuppositions (Baraldi, 2007; 2009; Bohm, 1996; Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001; Heritage, 1985; Hutchby, 2005; Littlejohn, 2004; Littlejohn & Domenici, 2001; Pearce & Pearce, 2003; Rogers, 1951): 1) a fair distribution of active participation (*equity*); 2) attention, sensitivity and active listening of the other's feelings and viewpoints (*empathy*); 3) acknowledgement, understanding, respect, trust, reciprocity

and coordination of different perspectives (*empowerment*); 4) the positioning of the participants as unique, specific and autonomous persons; 5) the primacy of affective expectations, which are based on the value of self-expression and the recognition of personal opinions, feelings, experiences and narratives. A dialogic communication can be accomplished through specific dialogic actions, such as: a) promotional and clarification (open) questions, which stimulate the interlocutor's active participation; b) encouragement and invitations to take the floor; c) echoes, minimal responses, and feedback of understanding, confirmation and support; d) positive responses and appreciation; e) formulation of the content of the previous turn/s, thereby making the 'gist' explicit, as well as developing or summarising; f) personal expressions and narratives.

Recent research (Baraldi, 2014; Baraldi & Iervese, 2017) argued that *dialogic facilitation* can be more effective than educational monologues and traditional teaching in enhancing children's participation, empowerment, and agency. Relying on dialogic actions and orienting communications to the primacy of affective expectations, the positioning as persons, and the value of self-expression, dialogic facilitation principally aims to promote: 1) children's active participation and personal expression; 2) dialogue among children, and between boys and girls, and not only adult-child dyadic sequences; 3) children's agency in producing knowledge, by downgrading adults' epistemic authority; 4) the empowerment of children's different perspectives and the coordination among them; 5) children's reflection on the different ideas, experiences, emotions and feelings voiced; 6) children's doubts on common sense, stereotypes, prejudices; 7) a co-construction of new stories, alternative to the dominant narratives.

The main objective of this paper is to extend research on the expression and challenge to gender stereotypes in educational contexts (Abbatecola & Stagi, 2018; Cardellini, 2017; Cook-Gumperz, 2002; Markowitz & Puchner, 2016; Priulla, 2013; Rossi & Ballestri, 2018) by examining the interplay between specific forms of communication between adults and children during extra-curricular discussion activities, and the narratives produced on the gender order. A narrative approach can be useful in inspecting how speakers invoke and make relevant culturally available notions of gender, stereotypes, etc., and how they construct and negotiate gender narratives and identities in interactions.

Narrating gender in interaction: a performative and conversational approach

Baker (2006) argues that *narratives* are public, collective or personal stories, (self-)descriptions, explanations, comments of past, present and future

events; they are social constructions and *create* – rather than represent – reality. Narratives are also stories that orient actions and can change in accordance with a person's experiences. A narrative can reproduce the existing power structures, for example describing a patriarchal and traditional gender order as 'true', 'indisputable' and 'unchangeable', but it can also provide an opportunity to negotiate and challenge those structures; as discussed by Connell (2009), at any time a variety of divergent narratives exist, with dominant, 'resistant', 'deviant' and alternative narratives in competition or interlaced.

Narrating is an *activity* and a *performance* that takes place between people in everyday social interactions and conversations, with situated and contextual features (Bamberg, 2006). For different reasons, each participant can take the floor, start storytelling and produce *small stories* (Bamberg, 2006; 2010; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008): though tellability and self-disclosure are not always guaranteed (for instance when intimacy or fear are present), a 'polyphonic', or many-voiced narration, or *co-narration* with multiple active co-tellers can also occur (Norrick, 2007).

According to Somers (1994), through narratives and narrativity people constitute their own social identities. Narrative identities are particular, flexible, contingent, and the product of social relationality: so, gender identity is a *processual narrative identity* and it needs to be analysed empirically, in the context of relational, historical and cultural backgrounds. Through storytelling and narrating, people position themselves and accomplish a 'sense of self', a sense of 'who s/he is', in a self-reflective way: selves and identities are *done* in interaction and, through positioning, people can align with, or counter, master narratives and dominant discourses (Bamberg, 2004a; 2004b; 2006; 2010).

Another conversational approach focuses on gender in interactions. Specifically, Conversation Analysis (CA) and Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1997; Speer & Stokoe, 2011; Stokoe & Smithson, 2001; Weatherall, 2002) highlights the following aspects: a) the notion of *gender relevance* (both for speakers and analysts); b) the idea that the (re)production of normative assumptions and stereotyped representations about gender can be empirically examined analysing the forms of organisational structures used in the conversation; c) the devices of gendered terms, stereotypes, repairs, challenges, refusals, gender-neutral or gender-equalitarian accounts as interactional mechanisms that can contribute to gender relevance and (re)production; d) the idea that individuals are categorised or self-categorised (woman/man, mother/father, etc) in conversation, and that categories are normatively associated to activities or characteristics (*category-bound activities*); d) the notion of repair, as Weatherall suggests (2002, p. 775): "repair sequences involving gender are valuable data not only for what they may reveal about gender's relevance in interaction but also what they may tell about the kinds of gender norms that members orientate to."

However, as pointed out by Stokoe & Smithson (2001), a micro-analysis of talk-in-interaction and a turn-taking system cannot account for how gender norms influence actions: we need to go beyond the level of the text and the participants' orientation, and problematise common-sense and cultural knowledge when speakers invoke and make relevant culturally available notions of gender. Besides the use of the described narrative approach, and considering the limits of CA, it is necessary "to highlight the more general social processes producing and reproducing culture beyond the single interaction and determining important differences among interactions" (Baraldi, 2009, p. 4), i.e. to analyse the patterns of expectations as cultural presuppositions that contextualise the interaction and which are visible in participants' actions.

Data and methodology

The interactional data presented in the next sections are drawn from three different research programs, conducted over recent years on workshops in multicultural and mixed-sex classes of Northern Italy, under the supervision of the author of this paper.

The *first program* refers to the second stage of a training project on conflicts and mediation carried out in the town of Genoa (Italy) addressed to educators of preschools, and to teachers of primary and secondary schools. During the workshops, adults were expected to stimulate children's participation and discussion about toys, sports, jobs, etc., to challenge stereotypes and mediate possible conflicts, by reading 'gender-sensitive' children's books. This program comprised about 12 hours of interactions and involved an average of 180 children.

The *second program* refers to 4 hours of interactions between a teacher of a primary school from a third grade class (25 children aged 8), in a village near Modena (Italy). The teacher, by reading three short examples of classroom conversations about gender relationships (gathered from previous research), had the task of promoting children's active participation, reflection on stereotyped differences, dialogue, respect and friendship.

The *third program* concerns 8 hours of interactions between a trainer of a local feminist association and 25 students from a second grade class (aged 12) in a middle school in Modena (Italy); described in the project document as "educational workshops through dialogic facilitation and mediation, based on the use of images, doc-films, simulation games, etc.", this activity aimed at bringing out – and then challenging – children's gender stereotypes, at constructing alternative narratives of equality and respect, and at preventing gender-based violence.

In the following presentation, transcriptions extracted from audio- or video-recorded workshops during these research programs will be analyzed.

The video-recording took place with the consent of all the participants and of the children's parents; interactions were transcribed following a simplified version of the conventions developed in Conversation Analysis (CA) by Gail Jefferson, in particular:

[text	overlapping turns
[text	
(.)	short pause (less than one second)
(..)	short pause (around one second)
(03)	length of pause in seconds
te::xt	prolonged sound
text-	interrupted turn
text –	suspended turn
text	high volume or emphasis
(text)	unclear turn
(??)	text not understandable
((text))	information about the context
.,?!)	rough signs for intonation in the turn

Data were analysed in the light of the theoretical framework presented, with particular attention to the interplay between communication forms and gender narratives in adult-children interactions. The extracts selected and commented upon are representative of the most important forms of interactions observed in the audio- and video-recorded workshops of the three research programs described.

Data analysis

Narrating stereotyped gender differences

The perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the reproduction of narratives of the traditional and dominant gender order are a recurrent practice in the workshops investigated. This practice is mostly accomplished through dialogic facilitation, especially in the first phases of the activities, when one of the major goals was to 'bring out' children's gender stereotypes and bias, to let them express, spontaneously and without judging, these kind of representations. Nevertheless, gendered narratives can also occur when the interaction highlights the structural presuppositions of educational monologues and consequently a didactic and a more directive construction of narratives, for example:

Extract 1 [second program, primary school]

20. Teacher: good, we have understood that the girls speak about Daniele, about Winx. But are there other girls' topics that the boys don't like? Careful, I'm going to ask the opposite question later!

21. Francesco: ehm (..) because they talk about girls (..) girls from other classes
22. Teacher: about girls from other classes, then? What else do they talk about?
23. Boys all together: outfits, dance –
24. Teacher: very good, now let's ask the opposite question: what are the things boys talk about that girls just don't like?
25. Katia: you know I'm not interested because boys fight all the time and then talk about Dragon Ball, things like that
26. Teacher: well (..) judging from what I can see here at school I can say that's true because, even today, I had to tell off two boys who were kicking each other
27. Katia: that's why I prefer girls! But I would also like to be with boys
28. Teacher: without them using so violent and rough ways
29. Katia: yes!
30. Teacher: good that's one thing (..) let's listen to Giada
31. Giada: because they always give each other smacks and if they give each other smacks and I'm there then I get told off too even if I haven't done anything wrong
32. Teacher: slaps, kicks, smacks (..) one doesn't like ways that are too rough

This extract displays the reproduction of the traditional gender stereotypes by means of categorisations, 'border work' and educational monologues (cognitive formulations, oppositional questions, glosses, assessments) done by the teacher, all actions that leave little room for girls to intervene and to challenge the narrative constructed by boys about the girls' preferred topics, and vice versa. In turn 20, the teacher combines an assessment ("good") with a formulation of previous contributions based on cognitive expectations ("we have understood that"), a question that constructs gender oppositional groups and projects boys' negative depictions of females' topics ("but are there other girls' topics that the boys don't like?"), and a final gloss that reveals the teacher's expectations and control of the children's participation ("careful, I'm going to ask the opposite question later"). After Francesco's reply in turn 21 and the teacher's echo in turn 22 ("about girls from other classes"), the adult continues with categorisation and border work by using a didactic triplet: this consists of a question ("what else do they talk about?"), a boys' reply ("outfits, dance") and an assessment ("very good"), as if the teacher expected the correct (but stereotyped) answer. The didactic construction of a narrative on gender binary continues in the second part of turn 24 with a gloss ("now let's ask the opposite question") and a question ("what are the things boys talk about that girls just don't like?"). This action

projects girls' negative depictions of males' topics, displayed in turn 25 by Katia, who uses a generalisation and constructs fighting as typical of males ("you know I'm not interested because boys fight all the time"). The perpetuation of stereotypes is accomplished by the teacher in turn 26 (who however makes a generalisation by relating an episode which occurred at school but involved only two boys), in part by Katia in turn 27 (who nonetheless would like to 'pass through' gender borders), and in turn 31 by Giada (who associates boys with smacks). The teacher's normative formulations in turn 28 ("without them using so violent and rough ways") and turn 32 ("slaps, kicks, smacks (...) one doesn't like ways that are too rough") aim at correcting boys' behaviour from an educational stance, but at the same time they reproduce the stereotyped narrative of the "fighting and aggressive boys".

As said before, the construction of narratives on the binary, fixed and asymmetrical gender order takes place mostly when the form of interaction is a dialogic facilitation, as extracts 2 and 3 show:

Extract 2 [second program, primary school]

37. Teacher: so, based on what we have said, are there any differences between males and females? (05) Do you want to add something?
38. Sara: I mean (...) differences (...) males are more::
39. Francesco: stronger!
40. Sara: yes, stronger! While girls are politer (...) we also argue of course but (...) we give each other a gentle hit like that ((Sara gently hits her own arm))
41. Teacher: so are males more aggressive?
42. Sara: yes!! For instance, today the girls were playing tail grab but we gave each other gentle hits like that! ((Sara gently hits her own arm))
43. Giulia: yes, it was tail grab but without the tail!!
44. Teacher: Ok. Let's now listen to Katia
45. Katia: what I don't like about males is that when the girls are in a circle (...) like for the break, they pass by running and raising dust and don't even say I'm sorry; while if we do so we do say I'm sorry
46. Teacher: then males have different ways of doing things, but I don't think they do that on purpose, they don't think about that, they don't do it deliberately. Then of course it depends. Laura?
47. Laura: the difference between a female and a male is that (...) I'm not taking the side of females and saying males are wrong (...) it's just that males have (...) how can I say (...) a very strong character, while girls are quieter, kinder
48. Francesco: they are sweeter!!

Here the reproduction of stereotyped differences and the construction of a narrative on the traditional gender order are accomplished through dialog-

ic actions, such as promotional questions, formulations and expressions of personal points of view, which allows the adult to promote children's active participation and to accept all their contributions, even if inconsistent with the main purpose of the project (stereotypes deconstruction). In turn 37, the teacher formulates the gist of the previous turns and stimulates further participation through a promotional question that however relies on categorisation and border work ("so, based on what we have said, are there any differences between males and females? Do you want to add something?"). In the following turns, Sara and Francesco align with the teacher, by invoking common gender stereotypes (males as stronger, females as politer). Through an interrogative formulation in turn 41 ("so are males more aggressive?"), the teacher verifies her understanding of Sara's contribution, but she also reproduces the stereotyped social construction 'strength-aggressiveness-boys', which is confirmed by girls, who are clearly engaged, and remark on their own more polite behaviour ("today the girls were playing tail grab but we gave each other gentle hits like that!") and in assessing negatively the boys' attitudes ("they pass by running and raising dust and don't even say I'm sorry"). The teacher's formulation and personal expression in turn 46 ("then males have different ways of doing things, but I don't think they do that on purpose, they don't think about that, they don't do it deliberately. Then of course it depends") have a twofold consequence: 1) they mitigate girls' negative assessments, which is in fact repaired by Laura's refusal of a value difference between boys and girls; 2) they maintain the 'binary narrative' of gender and this projects the repetition of stereotypes by Laura and Francesco in the last turns (boys have a strong character, girls are quieter, kinder and sweeter).

The following sequence exemplifies a dialogic co-construction of a narrative on gendered jobs:

Extract 3 [third program, middle school]

20. Trainer: ((*writing on the board*)) it is seen as a problem, maternity as a problem, you'll see that we'll discuss it a lot, we'll discuss this aspect a lot, so thanks for having raised the topic, very well, tell me
21. Mohammed: it is like saying a girl works, like, cleaning toilets like that, whereas a man does not, meaning, the woman is better
22. Trainer: so a woman is better at doing certain types of jobs-
23. Mohammed: the woman, the woman is the one who takes care of children in the house, cleans the house and the man is the one who comes back at night
24. ((*the whole class laughs*))

25. Trainer: all ideas are worth saying (.) so, concerning the first question, in your opinion who has more chances to be hired, a man or a woman?
26. Mohammed: a man!
27. Petro: it depends on the job!
28. Trainer: so it depends on the job. For instance? Can you give me an example? (03) For instance, your classmate was saying uh was saying if the job considered is cleaning uh, then I'll hire a woman (.) this is the symbol for feminine you know, don't you?
29. Some: yes yes
30. Mohammed: instead fixing a car's wheels-
31. Trainer: that is, instead as a mechanic, since you wanted to work as a mechanic, right? For a mechanic we hire a man, uh?
32. Fabio: also for heavy work
33. Trainer: I only make you reflect upon how these questions are linked to one another, look at the question (..) there you go, this one here, do men jobs and women jobs exist? By looking at these two answers you have given I have to infer that yes, there exist jobs that are more suited to women, depending on the job we are talking about, do you all agree on this, or does anyone think differently?
34. Silvia: like, a man does jobs where strength is required
35. Trainer: ok, so mechanic or jobs that have to do with strength we hire a man, this is what you are saying, isn't it? Ok tell me
36. Mohammed: it is like saying I arm wrestle with a woman
37. Chiara: also because, like, women are more precise, so they're always there cleaning, maybe corners, or that is just how they are a little more precise
38. Michaela: also the seamstress
39. Trainer: also the seamstress! So according to your opinion the seamstress job is a job more for women. Does anybody not agree? (03) Do you all agree with these ideas?
40. Some: yes:::

In turn 20, the trainer's formulation ("it is seen as a problem, maternity as a problem"), gloss ("you'll see that we'll discuss it a lot"), appreciation ("so thanks for having raised the topic, very well") and invitation ("tell me") foster children's participation and initiation of a narrative about 'women's jobs'. The gist formulation to confirm her understanding (turn 22: "so a woman is better at doing certain types of jobs") and the inclusive confirmation and invitation in turn 25 ("all ideas are worth saying"), followed by a focused question to check ("so, concerning the first question, in your opinion who has more chances to be hired, a man or a woman?"), allow the trainer to accept all the children's contributions (though stereotyped) and to dialog-

ically support the co-construction of the narrative. Through turns 28 to turn 31, the trainer is able to reveal the children's stereotypes on 'men's jobs': in turn 28 there's a selective formulation that ignores the contribution in turn 26 ("so it depends on the job"), two open questions ("for instance? Can you give me an example?") and a gist formulation as a suggestion which confirms the gendered roles ("for instance, your classmate was saying uh was saying if the job considered is cleaning uh, then I'll hire a woman (.) this is the symbol for feminine you know, don't you?"); whereas turn 31 combines a gist formulation with an understanding checking to support Mohammed's personal expression ("that is, instead as a mechanic, since you wanted to work as a mechanic, right? For a mechanic we hire a man, uh?"), an action that elicits Fabio's alignment in turn 32 ("also for heavy work") and enhances the ongoing narrative. In turn 33, the trainer promotes reflection ("I only make you reflect upon how these questions are linked to one another, look at the question (...) there you go, this one here, do men jobs and women jobs exist?"), displays a summary formulation ("by looking at these two answers you have given I have to infer that yes, there exist jobs that are more suited to women, depending on the job we are talking about") and finally asks a focused question to check and open the floor ("do you all agree on this, or does anyone think differently?"). Turn 35 is a combination of feedback to express confirmation ("ok"), a summary formulation ("so mechanic or jobs that have to do with strength we hire a man"), an understanding checking to support and confirm children's expressions ("this is what you are saying, isn't it?"), and an invitation for further participation ("ok tell me"). The dialogic co-construction of a binary and stereotyped gender order ends with turn 39, in which the trainer combines an echo to confirm ("also the seamstress!") with a gist formulation ("so according to your opinion the seamstress job is a job more for women"), an open question ("does anybody not agree?") and finally, following a pause, a yes/no question that tends towards closing participation ("do you all agree with these ideas?").

Narrating a multiple, hybrid, equal and fluid gender order

In the workshops analysed, also the construction of alternative narratives or counter-narratives is mainly achieved through dialogic facilitation, but sometimes through directive or ambivalent forms: extracts 4 and 5 exemplify the first case, extracts 6 and 7 the second one.

Extract 4 [first program, preschool]

45. Educator: well today I wanted to tell you one thing that happened that I heard myself yes, friends play together and love each other but a girl the other day was invited to a birthday party by a boy but then when she was there at the party that boy didn't let her play and so she felt left out, help me understand why this has happened, why did

- her friend invite her but didn't let her play? What happened? (..) has anything like this ever happened to you?
46. Some: no::
 47. Luca: no I never did, many kids invited me to their birthday party and let me play
 48. Paolo: yes, me too
 49. Diego: me too
 50. Some: me too
 51. Educator: then nothing like what happened to that girl has happened to you but think about it how do you think she felt? Her friend invited her to his birthday party, she went there and then when she was there he didn't let her play, how do you think she felt?
 52. Luca: she didn't have fun because the boy didn't let her play he wanted to play just with boys
 53. Educator: oh so do you think that because he was a boy and she was a girl when he was there with his other male friends he preferred to play with them?
 54. Luca: yes because boys are a bit like that so they played together because the girl wanted to play with something else like dolls or something like that
 55. Educator: oh so because boys play some games and girls play some other games
 56. Luca: like knights superheroes and instead girls like Barbie princesses
 57. Lorenzo: Winx
 58. Andrea: horses too
 59. Educator: what?
 60. Andrea: [girls also like horses
 61. Luca: [but-
 62. Educator: hold on I didn't get it what has Andrea said girls like?
 63. Andrea: pink horses
 64. Educator: pink horses
 65. Luca: but horses are like more for boys it's boys who ride them
 66. Educator: oh so don't girls ride them?
 67. Luca: no girls are behind and don't ride
 68. Educator: oh really? I didn't know there were games for boys and games for girls, is it really like that?
 69. Some: yes
 70. Luca: yes because my sister has girls' games and I have boys' games! That's how it works otherwise if you're a boy and have girls' games how can you play? How can you play if you don't like pink stuff? So
 71. Educator: then colours as well?
 72. Luca: yes

73. Educator: oh how interesting! Let me listen to the others as well, sorry. I want to listen to everyone's opinion! Let's start from the girls, is what Luca says true? Tell me about it, Sara, is this what happens?
74. Sara: because it always goes like that
75. Educator: speak louder please I'm a bit deaf as I said last time
76. Sara: for example things always go like that with boys and girls
77. Educator: oh things are always divided into boys and girls
78. Luca: yes because even colours for example blue and green are for boys and pink is for girls
79. ((*others talk in overlap mentioning different colours; the audio is not completely clear*))
80. Paolo: red is for boys and yellow is for boys
81. Educator: you know when I was a kid my favourite was red and I wanted red shoes a red coat [a red shirt
82. Diego: [mine too
83. Educator: and they never told me that was not for girls and always bought those for me
84. Diego: my mother likes red
85. Luca: but blue is also more for boys
86. Sara: blue is for girls too
87. Lorenzo: all colours are for boys and girls
88. Educator: o::h

In turn 45, the educator starts narrating what happened to a girl who was invited to a birthday party but left alone during the play ("well today I wanted to tell you one thing that happened that I heard myself yes...") and promotes children's reflection and agency, downgrading her epistemic authority ("help me understand why this has happened..."); then, she stimulates personal narratives through an open question ("has anything like this ever happened to you?") that elicits Luca's personal narrative ("no I never did, many kids invited me to their birthday party and let me play") and the other children's alignment (turns 48-50). In turn 51, the educator displays a summary formulation ("then nothing like what happened to that girl has happened to you"), an open question to promote further reflection ("but think about it how do you think she felt?"), a reiteration of the initial narrative ("her friend invited her to his birthday party, she went there and then when she was there he didn't let her play"), and an open question to stimulate the children's empathy towards that girl ("how do you think she felt?"). These set of dialogic actions, over the next set of turns (52-72), further facilitate the boys' active participation and the construction of a narrative on a binary, stereotyped and unequal gender order, as already seen in extracts 2 and 3. The educator dialogically co-constructs this narrative (initiated by Luca in turn 52: "she didn't have fun because the boy didn't let her play he

wanted to play just with boys”) by using feedback of understanding (turns 53, 55, 66, 68: “oh”), formulations (mostly in an interrogative form) to check and promote further children’s participation and reflection (turn 53: “so do you think that because he was a boy and she was a girl when he was there with his other male friends he preferred to play with them?”; turn 55: “so because boys play some games and girls play some other games”; turn 63: “so don’t girls ride them?”; turn 71: “then colours as well?”), one echo (turn 64: “pink horses”), and three understanding checking (turn 59: “what?”; turn 62: “hold on I didn’t get it what has Andrea said girls like?”; turn 68: “oh really? I didn’t know there were games for boys and games for girls, is it really like that?”), actions that seem both to downgrade her epistemic authority and to introduce doubts into the jointly constructed narrative on gendered games. In the last part of the sequence, the educator enhances the dialogic facilitation of participation, introducing a new element that seems to foster an alternative narrative. Firstly, in turn 73, she makes a positive appreciation and displays interest (“oh how interesting!”), encourages equal participation by involving the girls (“let me listen to the others as well, sorry. I want to listen to everyone’s opinion! Let’s start from the girls”), and asks questions to check and to elicit other points of view (“is what Luca says true? Tell me about it, Sara, is this what happens?”). Secondly, in turn 78, the educator formulates the gist of Sara’s contributions (“oh things are always divided into boys and girls”), which align with the ongoing stereotyped narrative and are followed in turn by Luca’s alignment. Interestingly, however, Paolo’s expression in turn 81 goes beyond the gendered colours (“red is for boys and yellow is for boys”) and elicits a personal narrative by the educator (turns 82: “you know when I was a kid my favourite was red and I wanted red shoes a red coat [a red shirt]; turn 84: “and they never told me that was not for girls and always bought those for me”): these self-expressions facilitate children in changing or mitigating their initial viewpoints and in co-narrating a more fluid, multiple and equal gender order (turns 85-88).

Extract 5 [third program, middle school]

20. Trainer: ok, but if you had to choose (..) Let’s focus a little on the chairman and then on the chairwoman (..) Why is it better to relate with a chairman, because he is more authoritative or more authoritarian?
21. Mohammed: more authoritarian
22. Some: more authoritative
23. Trainer: so, as I said, authoritarian means strict, so this is a strict man giving strict rules, isn’t he? On the other hand, he might be authoritative: authoritative means something different. It means he is professional, that people perceive him as professional.
24. Paolo: perceive!

25. Some people: authoritative
26. Trainer: ok more authoritative then. Something else? Who thinks a chairman is better than a chairwoman and why? Is there anything else you would like to add?
27. Mohammed: I'd like a chairwoman.
28. Trainer: so (.) for those of you who would prefer a chairwoman instead: could you explain to me why?
29. Paolo: she's kinder.
30. Trainer: ok (.) the chairwoman is kinder (..) then? Other reasons why?
31. Claudio: because she's beautiful
32. Trainer: because she's beautiful (..) Who said "because she's beautiful"? ok ((*writing it on the blackboard*)) I wrote it (..) tell me
33. Andrea: it depends on the person
34. Trainer: it depends on the person
35. Andrea: yes, because there might be very kind and open-minded chairmen and other very strict and authoritarian ones. Same thing is with chairwomen.
36. Trainer: therefore, you say they are sort of interchangeable, depending on the person right? It depends on the person, thanks, good (.) tell me...

Here the trainer's dialogic actions, in particular a focused question to check (turn 20: "why is it better to relate with a chairman, because he is more authoritative or more authoritarian?"), two combinations of feedback of understanding with formulations and open questions (turns 26: "ok more authoritative then. Something else? Who thinks a chairman is better than a chairwoman and why? Is there anything else you would like to add?"; turn 30: "ok (.) the chairwoman is kinder (..) then? Other reasons why?"), and an echo (turns 32), initially facilitate the perpetuation of gendered representations. Then, they start to co-construct an alternative narrative on the primacy of personal differences over gender differences: the echo in turn 34 and the formulation with an appreciation in turn 36 ("therefore you say they are sort of interchangeable, depending on the person right? It depends on the person, thanks, good") are illuminating about the potential transformation of the narrative being produced.

As already announced, it can happen that alternative or counter-narratives, although less frequently, follow a clear directive construction or a more ambivalent form, as exemplified in the following two extracts:

Extract 6 [third program, middle school]

55. Trainer: ok then (.) good (.) let's pay attention to this ((*class is in a state of confusion*)) Kids, excuse me! Pay attention to this passage because we are now trying to understand together a very important thing (..) once

- we get this right, we will understand the rest as well but we've got to focus on what we are about (.) to face (.) so, all the things you've just said, all right and perfect things (..) let's say we need those things to mark the difference between what we mean as sex and what we mean for gender (..)is, what we mean as something natural and something cultural (..) of all the things you just said, the only thing that is natural, that is determined by nature, by biology, is sex, that is a person's genitals, right? You are either born male or female and this thing happens by nature right? All the other things you listed (..) male or female names, male or female clothing, male or female games mh? clothes (..) I don't know if I already said that (.) all [these things are-
56. Mohammed: [the wardrobe!
57. Trainer: right! The bedroom furniture, right? It is different. If you go in a shop they propose to you something different according to whether it is meant for a boy or for a girl. Right, good!
58. Chiara: in the other class, there's a girl but she's always wearing male clothing. Her name's Greta
59. Trainer: we're getting there now, good, we're getting there (..) we get there right now, see (.) all the things you're saying now, except sex as we have said, are things regarding gender, that is culture (.) With male or female gender, we mean those characteristics and behaviours that we intend culturally more apt to males or females right? But what does it mean that something is cultural? What does it mean that it is determined by a social convention? It is not like that the name Andrea is absolutely a male name because, as your mate here was rightly saying it can be either way. We might just go to the United States of America and find out that the name Andrea. (..) I have a female friend who comes from the United States and her name is Andrea Laura (.) The name Andrea is mostly used as a female name

In this example, the trainer displays cognitive expectations concerning children's participation and the importance for them to understand and learn the difference between both sex and gender, and nature and culture, as applied to men and women; moreover, she expresses some evaluations of the participants' contributions and long explanations about the social construction of gender differences. These actions clearly show the educational presuppositions of this interaction, a didactic and monological construction of a multiple and fluid gender order, in which the trainer maintains her epistemic authority and the children are mainly supposed to listen, to understand, to learn, and not to actively participate in the construction of the narrative.

The following last extract shows a possible ambivalence between dialogic facilitation and educational monologue.

Extract 7 [first program, primary school]

10. Teacher: are there things for boys and things for girls?
11. Some: yes::
12. Some: no:: (.) but (??)
13. Teacher: oh (.) wait (.) let's see who said yes and who said no (.) what did Matteo say?
14. Matteo: I say yes because there's also like a sport where you need (.) there's only the boy
15. Teacher: only the boy (.) which one?
16. Matteo: a sport of athletics
17. Teacher: a sport of athletics
18. Luca: it's true
19. Matteo: the rings [the rings
20. Aurora: [but I do the rings
21. ((*many talk in overlap*))
22. Teacher: please don't talk all together otherwise we can't understand (.) right (.) according to Matteo there's a sport which is only for boys like the rings (.) Aurora said no because I do the rings
23. Luca: Alice said that too
24. Teacher: Aurora (.) Aurora hasn't spoken yet
25. Aurora: because when I usually go to the gym I sometimes do the rings
26. Teacher: now she sometimes does the rings. Greta was saying there are or there aren't things for boys and things for girls?
27. Greta: there are: there aren't because there are sports you think are for boys or girls but then girls can do them anyway (.) they are not obliged (.) no girl doesn't have to do it
28. Teacher: they are not obliged ((*someone speaks unclear words*)) Davide
29. Davide: yes there are
30. Teacher: there are (.) oh Davide says there are things for boys and things for girls
31. Davide: sports for boys or for girls then the decision is made by:: the person like if she can do boys' things like::
32. Teacher: he says Davide that there are such things but (.) the decision (.) it's each one of us who can decide if he or she wants to do those things right? (.) Alessia
33. Alessia: there aren't
34. Teacher: there aren't
35. Alessia: uh::: in sports but in other things as well (.) in the past some girls (.) some girls who played soccer people don't tell them it's a sport for boys or girls because my sister's sister (..) the sister is not -
36. Teacher: your friend that's easier

37. Alessia: my friend plays soccer (.) with all her girl friends with all her girl friends she also plays with boys and every time –
38. Teacher: then soccer can also be a sport for girls uh (.) uh: Alice
39. Alice: for example a friend of mine (.) who started some (?) soccer with boys and then started playing that sport with girls
40. Teacher: but I would like to go back a little (.) sorry for interrupting you (.) to what Davide said that there are both things for boys and things for girls (.) but:: what counts is your decision
41. Davide: it's up to us to decide
42. Teacher: it's up to us to decide

Almost in all her turns, the teacher acts dialogically and co-constructs with the children two different gender narratives: one for the existence of 'thing for boys and things for girls' (mainly told by boys), the other one for a less binary, fixed and unequal gender order, in which girls can do any sport they wish (indeed, mainly supported by girls). After a yes/no and categorising question in turn 10 ("are there things for boys and things for girls?"), the teacher accomplishes a dialogic facilitation which develops into a potential dialogic mediation: she promotes equal participation (turn: 13 "let's see who said yes and who said no (.) what did Matteo say?"; turn 24: "Aurora (.) Auro::ra hasn't spoken yet", turns 28: "Davide"; turn 32: "Alessia"; turn 38: "Alice"), she displays echoes (sometimes partial) as feedback (turns 15, 17, 28, 30, 34, 42), one open question (turn 15: "which one?"), one polar question (turn 26: "Greta was saying there are or there aren't things for boys and things for girls?") and several gist or summary formulations to coordinate the different points of view (turn 22: "right (.) according to Matteo there's a sport which is only for boys like the rings (.) Aurora said no because I do the rings"; turn 26: "now she sometimes does the rings"; turn 30: "oh Davide says there are things for boys and things for girls"; turn 32: "he says Davide that there are such things but (.) the decision (.) it's each one of us who can decide if he or she wants to do those things right?"; turn 38: "then soccer can also be a sport for girls uh"). However, this dialogic facilitation and mediation in the end 'slips into' a sort of educational monologue or didactic triplet: in turn 40, the teacher combines a gloss with an educational formulation ("but I would like to go back a little (.) sorry for interrupting you (.) to what Davide said that there are both things for boys and things for girls (.) but:: what counts is your decision"); after Davide's reply, the teacher produces an echo to confirm and close participation, discouraging further children's contributions. In so doing, she advocates the boys' viewpoints, imposes her perspective, validates the narrative on the existence of a binary gender order, though underlining the importance of individual decisions.

Discussion and conclusions

Over recent years, there has been a two-fold tendency in policy making and intervention in the areas of children and women. Firstly, there has been a considerable growth of local, national and international projects aimed at preventing gender-based violence by increasing the awareness of the effects of gendered representations on prejudices, discriminating attitudes and violent behaviour, and by bringing out and challenging gender stereotypes. Secondly, huge attention has been given to the ways in which children's active and visible participation in decision-making, socialisation processes and educational interactions, could be enhanced and extended.

This paper has attempted to stimulate comprehension and reflection on how the social construction of gender, and consequently the prevention of gender-based violence, can be accomplished *in and on interaction* through the adoption of specific forms of communication that: 1) could foster children's participation *in* the co-production of new narratives, alternative to the traditional, stereotyped, and yet dominant ones; 2) could overcome the conceptualisation and the practice of education as a monological, directive, and asymmetrical interaction.

The analysis has revealed that both the perpetuation and the challenge of gender stereotypes and master narratives are *done* mainly through dialogic facilitation, less frequently through educational monologues or a more ambivalent form: interestingly, the data displayed a wide range of possible forms of interaction and their interplay with the narratives produced.

The evidence confirmed that dialogic facilitation, relying on a wide variety and combinations of dialogic actions (mostly: feedback of understanding, formulations, open or focused questions, appreciations and invitations to take the floor), appear to be more effective than a directive form in promoting children's active participation, not only in revealing, but also in countering, their gendered prejudices and representations, as well as in eliciting alternative narratives. Moreover, the dialogic co-construction of narratives of a multiple, hybrid, equal and fluid gender order is particularly productive when the facilitator enhances children's agency as epistemic authority and stimulates doubts, reflections and new stories, by using also personal narratives and positioning as a co-teller.

On the other hand, the extracts presented shed light on the limitations of interactions characterised by educational monologues, especially when the purpose of an intervention is to promote children's dialogue, reflection, and alternative stories. The most relevant problems are connected to those adult's actions that: 1) constrain and control children's self-expression; 2) emphasise cognitive expectations and the value of learning about 'what gender is and what it is not'; 3) maintain or upgrade adult's epistemic authority;

4) assess the (in)correctness of children's contributions. All these features lead to an asymmetrical and didactic construction of gender narratives in which children are positioned as listeners and learners, with few opportunities of voicing, initiating, and developing alternative and counter-narratives.

Finally, the analysis has shown that dialogic facilitation, when undertaken in school systems, can 'slip into' monologues, for example educational formulations which control and 'close' children's participation in the narrating process, which are mainly due to the influence of cognitive expectations and role performances.

Certainly, further research in educational settings in order to improve the effectiveness of dialogic facilitation is needed, also in connection with dialogic, transformative and narrative mediation (Winslade & Williams, 2011), both for the prevention of gender-based violence and bullying, and for the positive management of conflicts. Another challenge could be to explore the relationship between dialogic facilitation and two forms of teaching/learning sometimes applied in classroom management: 1) *facilitation*, a practice in which the teacher-facilitator should pursue a student-centred and an activity-based approach by promoting children's active participation, collaboration and responsibility in their learning process (De Sario & Fedi, 2011; Houff, 2010); 2) *dialogic teaching*, a practice primarily aimed at distancing monological and directive approaches and promoting students' participation, interaction, voicing, and reflective learning, during their daily curricular activities (Alexander, 2017; Littleton & Howe, 2010; Lyle, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2012; Molinari & Mameli, 2010; O'Connor & Michaels, 2007; Selleri, 2016).

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