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## *review 2*

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## **adapting philosophical dialogue to support the epistemic agency of neurodivergent children: a focus on children with developmental language disorder**

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### **how to quote the article:**

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## **1) summary of the paper**

The proposal on offer in this paper is to rethink the epistemic agency and inclusion of children with neurodiversity (who present with developmental language disorder (DLD)) by adapting the practice of philosophical dialogue to suit the unique needs of the children.

The objectives of the article are to theorise philosophical dialogue as an emancipatory approach for children with communication difficulties; and to reflect on the ableist prejudices that position such children as epistemically incapacitated. These aims are explored through the interactionist model of disability and Amandine Catala's conceptual framework for epistemic agency.

There are three themes explored in the introduction and literature review: the epistemic neglect of neurodivergent students, the need for better inclusive communication in education, and a rationale for how an adaptation of philosophical dialogue creates epistemic opportunities for neurodivergent children.

The method is contextualised within the author's project titled: "The practice of philosophical, creative and collaborative dialogue among students with DLD" (pg. 9). Eighteen students between the ages of 8-12 years participated in the project. The students presented with moderate to severe DLD that impacted on their scholastic and social lives.

Based on 'observed benefits', the paper theorises "caring facilitation" as an adaptation of philosophical dialogue. This approach foregrounds the role of the speech-language pathologist (SLP) and interprofessional collaboration (teachers) in order to account for the unique communication profile of children with DLD. The author motivates for an inclusive philosophical school based on the work of Chirouter and Lipman and a new relational ethics in education.

## **2) suitability of article to childhood & philosophy**

This paper addresses a very important – yet overlooked – topic in the P4wC literature which is neurodivergent children. Despite the emerging scholarship in philosophy of childhood, children with neurodiversity/divergence remain

sidelined and are indeed a category of ‘missing people’ in philosophy. I commend the researcher for foregrounding the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration amongst teachers and therapists as this partnership can only bolster the specificity of interventions and pedagogy for children with neurodevelopmental difficulties. Such research practice is cutting edge and reflects teaching/therapeutic excellence.

However, the issue of professional collaboration can be tricky to navigate, and requires a sound understanding and fine-tuning of the literature in all the disciplines concerned. My sense of the paper is that while the author is well versed in their own field, a greater degree of intellectual work is required in P4wC facilitation and pedagogy in order to strengthen the claims about interdisciplinary research, and also to motivate for the inclusive philosophical school that appears to be the ultimate goal of this paper.

Prior to an overall review of the paper, I offer section-by-section comments and suggestions as well as references which might benefit the argument and structure of this article.

## **2.1) title**

The title has four main concepts (epistemic agency, inclusion of children with neurodiversity, adaptation of philosophical dialogue and developmental language disorder) which made it difficult to establish the key idea. One would assume philosophical dialogue to be the focal concept as this article is intended for publication in *Childhood and Philosophy*. However, it was difficult to discern if this was truly the case. I suggest leaving out the developmental language disorder or reworking the idea within mention of neurodivergence.

## **2.2) abstract**

The abstract foregrounds the potential benefits of philosophical dialogue for DLD children, though there is a greater emphasis on the latter than the former. The use of “regular practice of philosophical dialogue” is ambiguous in both theory and practice. For instance, does the author refer to the Lipman-Sharp practice or Socratic dialogue? There are numerous jargon words evident such as neuronormativity, neuro ignorance, neurodiversity, epistemic agency and epistemic injustice; all of which may be complex for readers unfamiliar with the

terms. There is little written on how philosophical dialogue is put into action or theorised differently, raising questions about how the article fits in with the ethos of this journal.

### **2.3) introduction and literature review**

#### *overuse of jargon*

Throughout the text there is an overemphasis on jargon that is neither within the P4wC nor Philosophy of Childhood repertoire. For example, the introduction begins with terms such as ‘epistemic agency’, ‘testimonial injustice’, ‘hermeneutical injustice’ and ‘epistemic credibility’ in relation to neurodivergence and neuronormativity. These terms are inadequately referenced and leave the reader floundering and left to make conceptual connections.

#### *structure of the introduction paragraph.*

The paragraph establishes that the aim of the paper is the urgency of reviewing the epistemic agency of neurodiverse children. There is little mention of how philosophical dialogue works to achieve this purpose – a fact that is critically important to this journal. The complexity of terms and definitions reads more as a summary than an introduction. There is a great deal of intellectual trust that is required from the reader. For instance, in the following statement:

The reduction of epistemic credibility granted to students can produce testimonial, hermeneutic and acquisition EI (in the sense that understanding is in itself an epistemic good) ( page 9)

the reader has to accept what is written despite the lack of references and the questions that inevitably arise (what constitutes a reduction of epistemic credibility, how does understanding work as epistemic good? By whom? For whom?)

Again, throughout the text I kept asking about how the terms and concepts work, and it became somewhat challenging to keep in mind the definitions of terms while simultaneously making connections between the concepts. This leaves the reader having to do a lot of work in order to read the text critically. Certain concepts require greater clarity. For example, neurodivergence is not always associated with developmental language delay. This is not apparent in the

introduction and the body of the paper, though this might be because the author uses DLD as an example. However, it becomes an important point to consider when discussing the adaptation of philosophical dialogue.

It is worth noting that neurodiversity is an emerging and debatable field which means that it is really important to be clear on your position in the field. Elizabeth Pellicano's work is particularly useful in this area as is the emerging research with the autism / neurodivergent communities. I've included two references but there are many more!

Pellicano, E. and den Houting, J. (2022), Annual Research Review: Shifting from 'normal science' to neurodiversity in autism science. *J Child Psychol Psychiatr*, 63: 381-396. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13534>

Haar, T., Brownlow, C., Hall, G., Heyworth, M., Lawson, W., Poulsen, R., Reinisch, T., & Pellicano, E. (2024). 'We have so much to offer': Community members' perspectives on autism research. *Autism*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613241248713>

## **2.4) method**

I was very interested in the authors project and the nature of the interdisciplinary collaboration that took place. This is such valuable information! I could only glean a brief description of the project and the participants' ages. Could you say more about the nature of the neurodivergence with which the children present? And the specificities of the DLD? Again, such information is critical to theorising the adaptations that have been made, and also because DLD is the key variable in the paper.

It is very important to discuss how the philosophical dialogue was implemented and adapted. What materials did you use? What was the structure of the inquiry? How did you collect data?

I admit that I was very troubled about the following statements:

Indeed, they reported in their words, the development of their ability to open up to the ideas of others, while recognizing the importance of making an effort, especially when there are disagreements. This is significant because children with DLD frequently have challenges in social cognition due to weaknesses in the "theory of mind" (ANDRÉS-ROQUETA et al. 2013, 2016). Some

comments also indicated changes in self-perception, in particular the ability to communicate better, to manage one's emotions and a feeling of freedom during dialogues.

How did the children report such feedback? What measures were used to ascertain this feedback. Could the children truly report such gains given the communication 'failures' with which they presented? Please could you explain this in further detail? A note on the ethics of doing research with vulnerable children would be very helpful.

## **2.5) discussion**

The primary aim of this paper was to rethink the epistemic agency of neurodivergence and specifically DLD through philosophical dialogue. However, it is apparent that philosophical dialogue and practice is theorised along the lines of a psycho-social approach that mitigates the injustices (such as lack of epistemic agency) associated with DLD. The author's proposal of 'caring facilitation' requires greater explanation and depth to justify this claim.

While I have some understanding of what the author is attempting to convey through the proposed adaptation of philosophical dialogue, I am not sure that the proposal is novel. In fact, caring facilitation is intrinsic to the existing practice of philosophical dialogue. See Lipman (2003) for further information on critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinking.

Furthermore, I worry that philosophical dialogue is 'watered down' to a psycho-social tool for children who experience a lack of epistemic agency owing to DLD. Though the author mentions the usefulness of observations which provide teachers and therapists with insights into how to structure metacognition, I am left with wondering how this was achieved. More needs to be said about the type of metacognition, language etc and also the nature of the philosophical enquiries.

## **3) relevance and timeliness of the topic**

As discussed above, this is an important contribution to P4wC and the scholarship on Philosophy for Childhood. However, the author should orientate the focus of the paper so that it aligns with the aims of Childhood and Philosophy.

#### **4) argument structure and coherency**

##### **4.1) does the abstract adequately summarize the main issues addressed in the article?**

Yes, though I would consider the extent of the issues addressed to be secondary to the purpose of the journal.

##### **4.2) does the article fairly reflect current literature?**

Some references should be reconsidered. For example, Judy Singer (1998) is disputed by neurodivergent scholars as the pioneer of the concept of neurodiversity. See the following paper:

Botha, M., Chapman, R., Giwa Onaiwu, M., Kapp, S. K., Stannard Ashley, A., & Walker, N. (2024). The neurodiversity concept was developed collectively: An overdue correction on the origins of neurodiversity theory. *Autism*, 28(6), 1591-1594. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361324123787>

The author should consider the literature on how to navigate the neurodivergent terrain, for example the work of Elizabeth Pellicano (cognitive scientist and educational psychologist). The work of scholars such Helen Tager-Flusberg are significant for having acquiesced to the place of neurodiversity in the literature even though their focus is on neuroscience. There are many autism scholars who write about neurodiversity (see Damian Milton) whose work is important to the arguments in this paper. I would consider their work over the interactionist model of disability.

##### **4.3) are the objectives of the article well-defined?**

The author is clear that the purpose of the paper is to adapt philosophical dialogue to suit the unique needs of the neurodivergent child with DLD and also

to mitigate the social prejudices of the ableist community against said child. These are worthwhile if not noble objectives that fit in with the neurodiversity scholarship. See 4.1)

#### **4.4) are the ideas clear and well-developed?**

Throughout the paper, one gets the sense that the author is working out (and not through) the arguments. There are many jargon terms that belong to the author's original discipline. Some of the concepts are contentious and require further interrogation, which is not possible due to the scope of the paper. Other terms are explored but not sufficiently defined. For example not much is mentioned about the nature of DLD. For example, what is meant by content, use, and form? What is neurodevelopmental? What is language disorder? It will be helpful for readers to know exactly what DLD entails, for example:

"developmental language delay" refers to a condition where a child significantly lags behind their peers in acquiring language skills, meaning they have difficulty understanding or using spoken language, often presenting with challenges like limited vocabulary, trouble forming sentences, or following instructions, and this delay is not explained by other factors like hearing loss or intellectual disability; it's also commonly called "Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)" - this is from Google. See also this link <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/developmental-language-disorder>

Philosophical dialogue becomes lost in the excess jargon related to the field of SLP and disability.

There is an overemphasis on the 'neuro' such as neurodiversity, neurodivergence, neuronormativity, neurodevelopmental, neurotypical. Some are explained (neurodiversity) while other terms require greater clarification (e.g. what is the difference between neuronormativity and neurotypical?). Furthermore, neurodiversity is used interchangeably with neurodivergence which is incorrect. The author should explain the conditions which constitute neurodivergence, for example, ADHD, autism, dyspraxia, dyslexia, Tourette's and so forth. Within these conditions there exists great variation insofar as neurodevelopmental skills are concerned.



The discourses on epistemic agency (including epistemic ablement, injustices, capability etc) overshadow the philosophy dialogue and the community of inquiry pedagogy. While there is a connection between P4wC and epistemic equality, this relationship is not core to Lipman's P4wC. The author's reliance on Lipman's work is not clear in the text.

#### **4.5) are the arguments well-founded?**

The arguments are well-founded in the literature pertaining to epistemic agency and neurodiversity. However, for purposes of this journal the author needs to ground the arguments in P4wC and childhood studies. As described above, the stance pertaining to childhood is paternalistic, and one which the field of philosophy of childhood takes exception to (See the work of Walter Kohan, David Kennedy, Gareth Matthews, Karin Murris).

#### **4.6) are the conclusions expressed clearly?**

More needs to be said about Chirouter and Lipman's philosophical school as there is insufficient information provided to make such a judgement call. The discussion and conclusions cannot be justified owing to the limited information about method.

### **5) other aspects**

The author is encouraged to pay greater attention to the pedagogical aspects of P4wC. See Picturebooks and Pedagogy by Haynes & Murris (2012) for the dangers of a therapeutic approach to education and also Ecclestone, K., Ecclestone, K., & Hayes, D. (2008). *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203870563>

It might helpful to see the recent article by Gardelli, et al (2023) published in *Childhood and Philosophy*:

gardelli, viktor, backman, ylva, gardelli, åsa, & franklin, anders. (2023). "You Talk and Try to Think, Together" – A Case Study of a Student Diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder Participating in Philosophical Dialogues. *childhood & philosophy*, 19, 01–28. <https://doi.org/10.12957/childphilo.2023.70493>

See also Benjamin Lukey, who might be considered the ‘pioneer’ in the scholarship pertaining to autism and P4C: Lukey, B. (2004). Rethinking Dialogue: Reflections on P4C with Autistic Children. *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*, 17(1), 24–29

## **6) summary of the review (result of the evaluation process)**

This paper makes an important contribution to the field of disabled childhood pedagogy by addressing the ever-growing presence of children with neurodiversity in educational settings, and exploring how philosophical dialogue can be adapted to make space for children excluded from philosophy and pedagogy. The paper is bold and ambitious as it makes connections about the disabled child’s lack of status as an epistemic agent and seeks emancipatory measures from the ableist and social injustices leveled against a particularly vulnerable group of children – children who cannot express themselves sufficiently.

Though the article is theorised as interdisciplinary, it is firmly rooted in the field of inclusive education and rehabilitation for neurodivergent children, specifically for those with DLD. The literature in these fields, as caring and emancipatory as it may be, remains somewhat paternalistic in terms of how children are positioned. It is still the adult in charge of the child, the child as ‘lacking’ and ‘incapacitated’ on account of their status as child and more because of the developmental delays.

These ideas are in contrast with the philosophy of childhood, a body of scholarship which rejects the social, psychological and mainstream pedagogical placement of child on the basis of ability. While it is true that the article addresses a core group of marginalised humans (disabled children) and in doing so fits in with the special issue at the WCP, the relevance for the journal needs to be considered carefully. I draw the authors attention to the following:

- a. The overuse of SLP disciplinary-specific jargon which does not relate to the ethos of Childhood and Philosophy;
- b. The ambivalence of concepts such as neurodivergent, neurodiversity, neurotypical/neuronormativity;
- c. The absence of the child throughout the text;

- d. The lack of data and method of inquiry to justify the adaptation of philosophical dialogue;
- e. Philosophical dialogue is undertheorised in both concept and practice;
- f. The arguments that support inclusive philosophical education should include philosophical / P4C supported from a philosophical perspective and not from an interactionist model of disability. In fact, it is increasingly evident that the neurodiversity scholarship supersedes the interactionist model.
- g. There is a great sense that there is too much going on in this paper. It might be possible to write two papers out of this
- i. Philosophical dialogue and neurodiversity
- ii. Epistemic agency and the neurodivergence

My viewpoint is that the readers of *childhood and philosophy* will benefit more from this paper if the author restructures the paper so that child and philosophy feature more prominently than DLD. The starting point of the article should be P4C/philosophical dialogue rather than epistemic agency and interactionist model of disability. I have included key references that would benefit this paper.