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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Nicola Nasi (2023). Morality and polyphony in peer dialogues. Children's moral practices in heterogeneous classrooms. LANGUAGE AND DIALOGUE, 13, 453-474 [10.1075/ld.00158.nas].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/953377> since: 2024-01-23

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1075/ld.00158.nas>

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Nasi, Nicola. 2023. Morality and polyphony in peer dialogues. Children's moral practices in heterogeneous classrooms. *Language and Dialogue* 13(3), 453-474.

The final published version is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1075/ld.00158.nas>

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Morality and polyphony in peer dialogues. Children's moral practices in heterogeneous classrooms

Abstract

This study investigates children's dialogic negotiation of the moral order of the classroom in a heterogeneous peer group. Drawing from video-ethnographic research in two primary schools in Italy, the study adopts a CA-informed approach to analyze 9- to 10-year-old children's dialogic interactions around the appropriate and inappropriate ways of behaving in the classroom. As the analysis illustrates, children reproduce institutional moral norms and ideologies to sanction perceived infringements of the classroom moral order. In response to that, the recipients provide accounts to justify their conduct *or* resist the moral accusation of their classmates. In the discussion it is argued that these morality-building practices are relevant to (a) children's negotiation of their social organization and local identities in the peer group and (b) children's socialization to the moral expectations of the classroom community.

Keywords

Classroom dialogue, peer interactions, polyphony, morality, cultural diversity, ethnography and Conversation Analysis

1. Introduction

In the last decades, public schools have become major sites of language and culture contact, as they are attended by an increasing number of students with a migratory background. In these "diverse environments" (Zoletto 2012), a central focus of institutional policies and school professionals is to socialize children into competent membership of a single, shared community. This process of gradually introducing children to the social expectations of the classroom happens mostly in and through dialogic interactions: experts socialize novices to the expected ways of behaving through the local deployment of various verbal and non-verbal resources (Caronia 2021).

Notably, this dialogic process also regards the *moral order* of the community, i.e. the set of moral norms and ideologies that regulates and establishes which behaviors are considered appropriate and non-appropriate in that specific context: by interacting on an everyday basis, the expert members of a community introduce novices to local conceptions of right and wrong, which gradually come to constitute the moral standard of the community. As shown by previous studies, the negotiation of moral norms and ideologies does not exclusively pertain to the teacher, as children play an active role in the daily construction of the classroom moral order (see Goodwin & Kyratzis 2007). However, despite the centrality of children's peer interactions for the management of classroom morality, there is a relative paucity of studies on the dialogic practices through which children co-construct a certain moral environment, and on how the latter is intertwined with adult mandates and ideologies (but see Cekaite 2013, Niemi 2016).

Based on two primary schools in Northern Italy, this study considers children's dialogic negotiation of the moral order of the classroom and their local re-production of institutional moral ideologies in the peer group. Specifically, the analysis will illustrate how children reproduce and enforce institutional morality after perceived breaches of the moral order of the classroom. In this way, children act as spokespersons for the institutions, voicing messages and ideologies that were first introduced by the teacher. These institutional conceptions of the morally (in)appropriate behaviors in the classroom can be complied with or resisted by the other children, who thereby contribute to the dialogic management of the local moral order. In the discussion it is argued that these morality-building practices are relevant to (a) children's social organization and local identities in the peer group and (b) children's peer socialization to the moral expectations of the classroom context. As regards the latter, these kinds of practices seem extremely relevant for non-native children's apprenticeship period in the new community.

The aims of the paper are twofold. First, the article aims to highlight the dialogic practices through which children construct and negotiate a specific moral order in the classroom. Second, it aims to critically discuss the relevance of this kind of practice for children's negotiation of the social organization of the peer group and for children's socialization into the local expectations of the classroom community.

2. Theoretical background

The study sets out from the paradigm of peer language socialization (Kyratzis & Goodwin 2017), according to which children gradually acquire sociolinguistic competences through dialogic interactions with the other members of a certain community. Through language and other semiotic systems (see Weigand 2010), children are gradually introduced to the expected ways of thinking and acting of their social community: by participating in everyday activities in a semiotically-rich environment, children learn the appropriate ways of using the resources in their repertoire in order to achieve their local communicative purposes.

One of the main socializing contexts to the expectations of the adult society are public schools: children often spend most of their waking hours in these environments, which shape children's development according to the shared criteria, beliefs, values, and expectations of the broader community (James & James 2004). Notably, in the last decades public schools have become increasingly heterogeneous, as they enroll a relatively high number of students with different socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Eurydice 2019; see Baraldi 2006). In this regard, schools are the primary institutions where familiar cultures (or, more broadly, children's backgrounds) are confronted with the practices and worldviews of a possibly different, broader community.¹ This encounter leads to the construction of a local social order that is the result of a continuous negotiation between participants: beliefs, practices, and assumption that are taken-for-granted within children's various backgrounds are modified, resisted, or integrated into a 'new' local culture that participants jointly construct (Yamada & Singelis 1999, Todd-Mancillas 2000, Figueroa & Baquedano-Lopéz 2017). Clearly, this negotiation creates a tension between children's so-called 'heritage' cultures and the school institutional culture, resulting in a paradox whereby children's cultural assumptions are simultaneously preserved and respected *as well as* transformed and possibly abandoned (Baraldi 2009).

Crucially, this local negotiation and the concrete handling of this paradox happen mostly in and through dialogue (Gumperz & Roberts 1991, Kecskes 2014). It is mainly by interacting with each

¹ This clash is often approached in terms of so-called "heritage" cultures and "host" cultures (Appadurai 1990). Clearly, this dichotomizing tension is often constructed in media and political narratives, and it does not necessarily correspond to the heterogeneous nature of migrant (and native) communities, where there might be significant endogenous diversity between families and individuals (Garcia-Sanchez 2014).

other that children and teachers manage to achieve an intersubjective understanding of the context in which they are currently acting in: these interactions allow them to dialogically constitute a shared life-world, which also means a shared social and moral order that permits the relatively smooth unfolding of ‘ordinary life’ (Linell 2009). A central aspect of this negotiation and of school shared ‘culture’ regards the moral order of the classroom. Through dialogue, teachers and students negotiate local conceptions of right and wrong, continuously ratifying and re-establishing the set of behaviors that are considered appropriate or non-appropriate within that specific context.

2.1. A dialogical perspective on classroom morality

A significant amount of research on children’s morality has been conducted by scholars within developmental psychology, who often based their studies on hypothetical situations and laboratory settings (e.g., Bascelli & Barbieri 2002). This article adopts a different perspective, as it focuses on children’s ‘natural’ interactions in the classroom and considers morality as both embedded in and the outcome of everyday dialogic interactions (Bergmann 1998, Linell & Rommetweit 1998, Sterponi 2003). Morality is thus approached as a situated activity, with a focus on how people produce and are objects of moral evaluations, display a certain stance in relation to what they deem appropriate or inappropriate, make choices regarding morally acceptable ways of behaving, and assign or are assigned blame or praise in relation to their choices (Jayyusi 1991). In other words, the analytical focus is on how participants enact, negotiate, and transform their local conceptions of right and wrong in and through language and other semiotic resources. Although these practices of morality-making are arguably ubiquitous in human interaction, there are indeed privileged ‘avenues’ to investigate morality as a social action. For instance, moral concerns emerge with particular evidence during (the sanctioning of) breaches of the moral expectations of the community (Drew 1998) and during account practices (Buttny 1993, Sterponi 2003). As regards the former, participants might hold a transgressor(s) individually or collectively *accountable* (in the sense of responsible, Linell 2009) for a breach of the local order. In response to that, the alleged transgressor might provide an *account* as an attempt to justify his/her previous conduct (Robinson 2016) or s/he might variously resist the ascription of blame. Through these dialogic practices, participants build a locally relevant moral order and continuously position themselves in relation

to these moral expectations and obligations, thereby contributing to the construction of a specific moral identity (Sterponi 2009).

In the classroom, the range of morally appropriate behaviors is bound to the institutional normativity of the context (Margutti & Piirainen-Marsch 2011): teachers and students can be variously aligned or misaligned to these institutional expectations, and continuously construct and re-shape the local moral order of the classroom community (Niemi 2016). This local co-construction goes along with the process of socialization into the expectations of the context: in and through various practices, children are introduced to the set of culturally and contextually shaped norms that regulate classroom activities. In turn, institutional morality is bound to the standards and ideologies of the broader community (Blum-Kulka & Snow 2004, Howard 2009). The teacher is the institutional figure who is mainly responsible for this process, i.e. for socializing children into culturally and morally appropriate ways of behaving (Wortham 2006, Cekaite 2013). In this regard, the centrality of the teacher has brought scholars to focus primarily on his/her morality-making practices in the classroom. Nevertheless, recent literature has shown the role of children in the moral socialization of peers and their everyday practices of morality-making (see Kyrtzis & Goodwin 2017).

2.1.1. Morality and polyphony in the peer group

Students play a central role in the local construction and management of the classroom order and discipline. For instance, previous literature has shown how children might use various verbal, embodied, and material resources to co-construct and negotiate what constitutes (in)appropriate conduct in the classroom (e.g., Powell, Danby & Farrell 2006, Cekaite 2013, Niemi 2016, Nasi 2022a). This joint construction of the local moral order is often bound to institutional normativity, as children orient to the rules and constraints that the teachers introduced. Specifically, children might be variously aligned or misaligned to the institutional moral order. On the one hand, they might use institutional restrictions to build shared transgressive practices in the peer group, possibly (but not necessarily) away from the teacher's disciplining gaze (Mayall 1994; Corsaro 1985, 1990). On the other hand, children might reproduce adult messages and moral ideologies in the peer group, in this way displaying alignment to the institutional order (Cobb-Moore, Danby

and Farrell 2009, Mökkönen 2012). For example, children might reproach a classmate by formulating a must-formatted institutional rule (Nasi 2022b). Notably, these institutionally sanctioned moral rules are at times inscribed in the broader ‘discourse’ of the community; in this regard, children’s reproduction of these rules in the peer group can be seen as a form of *polyphonic repetition*, i.e. a recycling of canonical formula that belong to the available (adult) repertoire (Bazzanella 2011). In children’s morality-making practices there are thus traces of various ‘voices’ that pertain to the institution and to the broader community in which schools are embedded (Bakhtin 1984; see the analysis).

Overall, previous studies have underlined that children actively contribute to shape, ratify, and challenge institutional normativity through their concrete practices in the classroom. This peer negotiation of the classroom moral order has a socializing potential. By locally reproducing adult messages and ideologies, children socialize their classmates to the expected ways of behaving at school: the job of turning children into “acceptable moral beings” (Wootton 1986, 147) does not rest exclusively on the shoulders of their teachers. Apart from this socializing potential, children’s repetition of adult messages is intertwined with their social identities and the social organization of the peer group (Evaldsson 2007). When children reproduce adult messages, values, and beliefs with their classmates, they often bend them towards their local purposes (see the concept of *interpretive reproduction*, Corsaro 1992). For instance, children might reproduce adult messages and ideologies to negotiate the social hierarchy of the peer group, e.g. to assume an authoritative position among classmates (Nasi 2022c).

3. Setting and methodology

The study is based on video-ethnographic research that was conducted in two primary schools in Northern Italy. The schools are placed in a low socioeconomic area and enroll a significant number of children with a migratory background. In this context, 30 hours of video-recorded interactions were collected during 9 months of ethnographic fieldwork. These interactions were transcribed (see Jefferson, 2004) and analyzed with the local research team. Specifically, the analysis relies on the micro-analytical instruments of Conversation Analysis and on the use of ethnographic information (Maynard, 2006; see Weigand 2010 on the role of contextual information for the analysis of dialogic interactions). This combined methodology allows the analyst to highlight the

various verbal, embodied, and material resources through which children locally co-construct the moral order of the peer group (Evaldsson, 2007).

Specifically, the analysis considers peer interactions between 9- to 10-year-old children. In the corpus, children made relevant the moral order of the classroom in various ways. For example, children explicitly topicalized untoward conduct (e.g., “[a classmate] always behaves bad and makes teachers angry”) or sanctioned a behavior that they deemed inappropriate (“you mustn’t help him!”; see Nasi 2022b). Broadly, children’s morality-building practices often emerged after a perceived infringement of the social expectations of the group. In response to these infringements, children sanctioned the transgressor by voicing institutional messages regarding the appropriate ways of behaving in the classroom. In turn, the ‘transgressor’ either resisted the sanctioning or acknowledged the breach by providing an account that justified his/her previous behavior. The sequential structure of these exchanges is thus roughly the following:

INFRINGEMENT → SANCTIONING → RESISTANCE/ACCOUNT

The analysis revolves around three occurrences which are emblematic of the different sequential outcomes and participation frameworks (Goffman 1981) of this kind of practice. Ex. 1 presents a dyadic sequence in which the moral sanctioning is followed by an account that attempts to justify the infringement. Ex. 2 presents a dyadic sequence in which the moral sanctioning is followed by explicit resistance. Ex. 3 presents a multiparty sequence in which several children sanction a classmate for her untoward conduct.

4. Analysis

The first excerpt was recorded before the beginning of the lesson in the ordinary classroom. Three children with a migratory background stand in front of a desk and discuss their homework. For that day, children were expected to do a lexical exercise in the book.

Excerpt 1

- 1 (*Jane, Lisa and Elke stand in front of a desk*)
2 Jane avete fatto?

3 Lisa **have you done it?**
 3 Lisa no tu?
 no you?
 4 Jane no. (.) io non l'ho [fatto
 no. (.) i haven't [done it
 5 Elke [va bè io non ho capito una- una
 [well i couldn't understand a- a
 6 cosa non so che- che cos'era, (.)
 thing i don't know what- what it was (.)
 7 non sapevo il significato ^allora non l'ho fatta una.
 i didn't know the meaning ^so i didn't do one.
 8 solo una cosa.
 just one thing.
 9 ^((Lisa goes away))
 10 Jane non l'hai fatto?
 you haven't done it?
 11 Elke no io ^l'ho fatto.
 no i ^have done it.
 12 ^((open the book, leaf through the pages)) [Fig. 1]
 13 ^questo non capivo! cioè che cos'è candi- cànido?
 ^this i couldn't understand! i mean what is candi- candid?
 14 Elke ^((points to something on the book))
 15 Elke ((shrugs))
 16 che ne so. quindi non l'ho fatto.
 what do i know. so i haven't done it.
 17 non ho fatto solo uno
 i haven't done just one
 18 Jane (io invece non l'ho) fatto tutto
 (i instead have) done nothing
 19 Elke quindi facevi prima a non arrivare a scuola
 so it would have been better not to come to school at all
 20 perchè il maestro, eh: sai da quanto che dice
 because the teacher, eh: you know how long he's been saying
 21 **(0.3)**
 22 Elke [dovete avere eventuali compiti tutti fatti
 [you must have all homework done
 23 Jane [no: ma (avevo le gare)
 [no: but (i had a tournament)
 24 Elke ah=lo so però,
 ah=i know but,



Fig. 1. Jane and Elke look at the book with the homework

At the beginning of the sequence, three girls stand in front of a desk. Jane asks her classmates if they had done the homework (*have you done it?*, line 2) and Lisa reveals that she had not done it (line 3). Lisa also asks back if Jane had done the exercise, and Jane admits not having done it (*no i haven't done it*, line 4). In overlap with Jane's turn, Elke intervenes to share her situation: she could not understand the meaning of a word, so she hasn't done a part of the exercise (*i didn't do one. just one thing*, lines 5 to 8). With this move, she partly aligns with her classmates who had not done the homework, as she points out that she has a missing answer in the exercise. At the same time, in Elke's extended turn there are already traces of the fact that they are dealing with a sensitive issue: not doing the homework is an infringement of institutional normativity, usually sanctioned by the teacher (see Elke's stress on her missing "just one thing", line 8).

After a few turns, Elke further states that she missed "just one" exercise (line 17). This turn is responded to in a contrastive fashion, as Jane admits having done no homework at all (*i instead have done nothing*, line 18). After this 'admission of guilt', Elke starts to openly sanction her classmate. First, she tells Jane that she should have better stayed home instead of coming to school (line 19). Second, she accounts for this statement by voicing the institutional figure of the teacher. The teacher's talk is directly reported (Clift & Holt 2006): after an initial gloss (*he's been saying*, line 20; see Orletti 1983), Elke reproduces the deontic rule that the teacher introduced (*you must have all homework done*, line 22). Notably, the rule is emphasized with a reference to time and to

Jane's knowledge of the rule (*you know how long he's been saying*, line 20), which aggravates Jane's infringement of the moral order of the classroom. With these moves, Elke constructs Jane as a morally reproachable child, individually responsible for the breach of institutional expectations.

Faced with Elke's sanctioning, Jane tries to resist this ascription of a problematic identity by providing a justification for her untoward conduct. She accounts for her transgression by stating that she had a sport tournament (line 23). Notably, with this account Jane aligns with the institutional moral order, as the rule (i.e., 'homework must be done') is not questioned. Despite this alignment, Elke further problematizes Jane's conduct by rejecting her account: first, she states that she already knew that Jane had had a tournament; second, she utters an adversative conjunction with a slightly rising intonation and without completing the sentence, evoking thereby one of the possible counterarguments (*i know but*, line 24). After this problematization of the validity of Jane's justification, the topic is abandoned.

Ex. 1 is an example of children's co-construction of the moral order of the peer group. In this case, both children seem aligned to the institutional moral order and ratify it through their dialogic interaction. Notably, this morally-laden interaction is relevant to children's local identities, as (a) Jane is constructed as a morally reproachable child, and (b) both children attempt to display their being 'good students' (Cekaite 2012; see Elke's repeated statement that she missed "just one thing" and Jane's justification for not having done the homework).

In the corpus, children are not always aligned to institutional normativity, as there are several occurrences of open resistance to the moral mandate of the school. Ex. 2 is an example of this resistance. The sequence involves Yassin, a child with a migratory background, and Carlo, who is of Italian origin. Children are painting with acrylic colors in small groups. On the desks there are some glasses of water to clean the brushes. Yassin has been playing with the water for some time, adding various colors in order to see how the color of the water changes. Carlo sanctions this conduct with reference to the moral ideology of the institution.

Extract 2

1 ((*Yassin adds various colors to the water in a glass*))

2 Carlo ma scusa yassin, hai un lavoro da finire
sorry yassin, you have a task to finish
3 e te fai i giochi con l'acqua!
and you play with water!

4 Yassin prima mi ()
first you ()

5 Carlo ma poi guarda che yassin- yassin, (.) guarda che non va bene
look yassin- yassin, (.) mind that it's not good
6 poi perchè te sprechi solo acqua per niente,
because you waste water for nothing,
7 solo per fare acqua colorata!
just to do some colored water!
8 (0.5)

9 Carlo ma guarda che sprechi dell'acqua che serve eh?
mind that you waste water that is needed eh?

10 Yassin prima mi ha aiutato poi ()
first you help me then ()

11 Carlo sì ma è acqua che [serve!
yes but it's water that is needed!

12 Yassin [ma vattene!
[go away!

13 Carlo ma è acqua che [serve!
but it's water that is needed!

14 Yassin [ma vattene via!
[go away!

15 Carlo è acqua che serve a [tutti!
it's water that everybody needs!

16 Yassin [ma no:, vattene. (0.2)
[no:, go away. (0.2)

17 te l'ho detto stai zitto, (.) stai zitto.
i told you shut up, (.) shut up.

18 Carlo è acqua che serve a tutti!
it's water that everybody needs!

19 Yassin sì serve a tutti:, (.) e prima mi hai aiutato
yes everybody needs i:t, (.) and first you help me
20 e dopo mi dici devi- no no, bla bla, stai zitto.
and then you tell me you must- no no, bla bla, shut up.

Yassin has been playing for some minutes, and Carlo decides to explicitly problematize his behavior. He first draws his attention (*sorry yassin*, line 2) and then reproaches him by referring to children's school duties: if a child has a task to finish, s/he is not supposed to play (*you have a task to finish and you play with water!*, lines 2 and 3). Yassin resists this first sanction, and Carlo changes argumentation. First, he repeats Yassin's name twice, individually spotlighting him as the subject of the sanctioning (line 5; see Galeano & Fasulo 2009). Second, he evokes a moral rule that is bound to institutional ideologies of saving resources (*it's not good because you waste water*

for nothing, lines 5 and 6) Specifically, ‘waste’ is a morally-laden word in the institution, as children are often reminded about the limited resources on earth (usually within a broader discourse on the challenges of climate change). In this case, water is constructed as a precious good that should not be wasted “just to do some colored water”, which is interactionally constructed as a trivial endeavor. Yassin does not ostensibly reply and, after a brief pause, Carlo reiterates his argument by adding that Yassin is wasting a good that “is needed” (line 9).

With these moves, Carlo tries to re-establish the institutional moral order in the peer group. At the same time, he constructs Yassin as morally reproachable and individually accountable for what is constructed as a serious misdeed. Notably, Yassin does not align with the moral norm evoked by Carlo, and further resist the sanctioning and the ascription of a problematic identity: he starts reminding Carlo that he first helped him, underlining his hypocrisy in sanctioning a behavior that he took part in (line 10), and then repeatedly issues imperatively formatted directives (*go away!*, lines 12 and 14).

Despite these directives, Carlo further tries to enforce the moral ideology of the institution. There is a climax in Carlo’s contributions, as he deploys incremental verbal and prosodic resources to obtain Yassin’s compliance (e.g., an exclamative intonation; see lines 5 to 18). In this case, he adds a further element that frames ‘water’ as a collective good: he refers to the whole community as a potential beneficiary of the water that Yassin is allegedly wasting (*it’s water that everybody needs!*, line 15). The use of ‘everybody’ points to the constraints that limit individual freedom and will in a broader community: Carlo’s moral accusation refers to the presence of the Other, who might need the common good that Yassin is currently using (see Caronia, Colla & Galatolo 2021 for a similar case in family interactions). However, also this argument is seemingly not enough, as Yassin issues further directives to counter Carlo (*i told you shut up, shut up.*, line 17).

At the end of the sequence, Carlo repeats his previous statement in a final effort to obtain compliance (line 18), which is however met with Yassin’s resistance. First, Yassin mockingly repeats Carlo’s words (*yes everybody needs it*, line 19). Second, he revives his previous argumentative line, accusing Carlo of hypocrisy: he first helped Yassin with the water and now reprimands him (*first you help me and then you tell me you must- no no, bla bla*, lines 19 and 20). Carlo’s speech is directly reported with an initial gloss (*you tell me*). Notably, Yassin has possibly difficulties in reporting Carlo’s exact words, and resorts thus to a simple formula that mocks

Carlo's oppositive stance (*no no, bla bla*, line 20). Yassin concludes his turn with a further directive that brings the exchange to an end (*shut up*, line 20).

Ex. 2 is an example of how institutional moral discourses can be taken up by children. On the one hand, Carlo enforces the institutional moral order, acting as a sort of spokesperson for the teacher. On the other hand, Yassin appropriates the institutional discourse with a mocking attitude (see line 19), in this way openly resisting the moral mandate of the institution. This resistance to school morality is mainly played out on the basis of a rejection of its 'spokesperson': Carlo is accused of hypocrisy and constructed as having no moral right to sanction his classmate. Therefore, apart from disputing moral norms and ideologies, in Ex. 2 children are also managing their peer social relationship. Carlo attempts to construct Yassin as morally reproachable, placing himself in the morally superordinate position of the 'good student'. Yassin resists this social hierarchy by underlining Carlo's involvement in the behavior that he now deems problematic. The sequence can also be relevant from a socializing perspective. By voicing institutional ideologies, Carlo is possibly introducing a classmate to the moral expectations of the Italian school. Even though this voicing is met with open resistance, the sequence can have a role in children's socialization to the value of water as a precious good *per se* and as a collective good that other people may need.

In Ex. 3, institutional morality is again resisted by a child. In this case, the sequence involves five participants: Nora, Elke, and Yan have a migratory background, whereas Carlo and Dario are of Italian origin. The lesson has ended and children are tidying up before the break. Nora plays with a tissue and is sanctioned by her classmates, who urge her to help them tidy up. In the sequence, children also refer to their appointed 'chores' in the classroom (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. “Who does what...”. The poster displays children’s appointed chores. Different groups of children are responsible for (a) materials (subdivided into ‘notebooks’ and ‘pencils’), (b) food and drinks (grouped under the label *camerieri*, ‘waiters’), (c) tidying up (see the label *ordinatori*), and (d) dealing with the schedule (termed as *segretari*, ‘secretaries’). In Ex. 2, Nora, Elke and Carlo dispute the duties that pertain to the ‘secretaries’.

Extract 3

- 1 ((most children are tidying up after the activity. Nora plays volley with a tissue))
 2 Elke nora invece ci- di giocare con una salvietta
nora instead o- of playing with a tissue
 3 qual è il tuo lavoro?
what is your job?
 4 Nora son segretaria.
i'm secretary
 5 Elke allora fai qualcosa come faccio io
then do something as i do
 6 invece di stare ferma a giocare con la salvietta bagnata
instead of staying there and playing with the wet tissue
 7 Nora ((keeps on playing with the tissue))
 8 ((1 minute))
 9 Elke adesso, (.) stiamo pulendo quindi dobbiamo pulire
now, (.) we are tidying up so we must tidy up ((looking at Nora))
 10 invece [di ()]
instead [of ()]
 11 Nora [io son segretario. (.) sono segretario.
[i am secretary (.) i am secretary.
 12 Elke ho capito ma [
i got it but [

13 Carlo [segretario ma devi far qualcosa
[secretary but you must do something

14 invece di non far niente eh!
instead of doing nothing eh!

15 Elke anch'io sono segretario eppure faccio qualcosa
i am also secretary but i'm doing something

16 non come te che [no- (0.2) che ()
not like you that [no- (0.2) that ()

17 Nora [cosa?
[what?

18 Carlo NORA:! MA SE STIAMO TUTTI PULENDO
NORA:! IF WE ARE ALL TIDYING UP

19 TI SEMBRA IL MOMENTO DI GIOCARE? AIUTACI!
DO YOU THINK IT'S TIME TO PLAY? HELP US!

20 Yan inf[atti!
rig[ht!

21 Nora [cosa faccio?
[what should i do?

22 Carlo >cosa fai, ac-< (.) fai- qualcosa fallo. fai.
>what should you do, ac-< (.) do- do something. do.

23 (2) ((Nora walks around))

24 Nora beh scusa: cosa farei adesso?
well sorry: what am i supposed do now?

25 Yan () dovevi lavorare
() **you had to work**

26 Dario ce n'è di roba da fare eh? basta vederla
there are things to do eh? you just need to see them

While most children are busy tidying up, Nora stands in the middle of the classroom and repeatedly throws a tissue in the air. This conduct is problematized by Elke, who describes it as “playing” (line 2) and enquires about Nora’s duties (*what is your job*, line 3). Nora promptly answers that she is “secretary” (line 4; see Fig. 2). Having successfully obtained Nora’s attention, Elke delivers a directive, prompting her to “do something” (line 5). Notably, Elke also displays herself as a role model, constructing her identity of ‘good student’ (*do something as i do*, line 5). However, Nora does not verbally respond and keeps on playing with the tissue, ignoring Elke’s directive.

After a minute, Elke looks at Nora and reiterates her directive. This time, she does not verbally refer to her classmate, but uses a plural pronoun (“we”) that underlines children’s collective duty (*we are tidying up so we must tidy up*, line 9). Despite the reference to the whole group, Elke’s verbal turn and gaze underline Nora’s moral responsibility, who refuses to help despite being a member of the classroom peer group. Indeed, Nora treats Elke’s statement as a personal accusation:

she repeats twice that she is secretary (line 11) in an attempt to justify her conduct. By referring to children's appointed duties, Nora tries to defend her face (Goffman 1967) on the basis of the assumption that secretaries are not responsible for tidying up. Nevertheless, her classmates reject the account: Carlo urges Nora to help them "instead of doing nothing" (*secretary but you must do something instead of doing nothing*, lines 13 and 14), whereas Elke displays herself again as a role model: she is also secretary and she is "doing something", unlike Nora (*i am also secretary but i'm doing something, not like you*, lines 15 and 16).² Despite this alliance of two children who construct her as morally reproachable, Nora further resists the directives and provocatively asks Elke what she has been doing (*what?*, line 17).

This further resistance triggers an escalation in Carlo's contribution to the dispute. With a heightened affective stance, he emphatically calls Nora by name (line 18) and then refers again to children's collective duty. The pronoun 'we' is opposed to Nora as an individual, who is constructed as morally reproachable for not contributing to the shared task (*IF WE ARE ALL TIDYING UP DO YOU THINK IT'S TIME TO PLAY?!*, lines 18 and 19). This high-volume rhetorical question is followed by an imperatively formatted directive which urges Nora to perform her duty as a classroom member (*HELP US!*, line 19). At this point, Yan also aligns with Carlo and Elke by confirming the appropriateness of Carlo's turn (*right!*, line 20). Confronted now with three classmates that sanction her conduct, Nora finally seems to concede that she should take part in the collective work and asks what she can do (*what should i do?*, line 21). However, this apparent display of availability is also partly defiant, as Nora does not start to tidy up and might be implying that there is actually nothing to do. Indeed, Carlo answers Nora's question in a rather abrupt and seemingly irritated manner: he repeats her questions, underlining thereby its inappropriateness, and baldly invites her to do something (*do- do something. do.*, line 22).

Nora now walks around the classroom and looks for things to tidy up, apparently willing to help her classmates. However, she cannot find anything and asks again, half-mockingly, what she is supposed to do (*well sorry what am i supposed to do now?*, line 24). This question stirs up again the conflict: Yan uses a past tense to underline her moral responsibility for not having done her duty (*you had to work*, line 25) and Dario reproduces a typical saying of the teacher in this

² In these turns, children recycle verbal elements of the previous contributions to pursue their communicative aims, which is a typical feature of children's peer conflict (see the concept of *format tying* in Goodwin 1990). Both Carlo and Elke repeat the word 'secretary' to tie their utterances to Nora's turn.

classroom, stating that there are always things to do for those who are willing to see them (line 26). Nora does not further reply and the dispute is abandoned.

Ex. 3 is a further example of children's negotiation of institutional morality. Faced with a child who is not helping them tidy up, several children reproduce a moral norm according to which all children must take part in collective duties. The 'transgressor' resists this moral norm and is thus heavily sanctioned by an alliance of four children, who underline her moral responsibility and ascribe her a problematic identity in the peer group. As in the previous excerpts, this sequence can also be considered in terms of children's peer socialization. By sanctioning her untoward conduct, children socialize Nora to the primacy of collective duties and subordinate her individual will to the needs of the whole group. After this conflictual event, Nora has possibly recognized the moral need to take part in group duties – if not because she truly believes in institutional moral ideologies, at least in order to avoid the ascription of a despised identity in the peer group, which may threaten her ability to build meaningful social relationships with her classmates.

5. Concluding discussion

Setting out from an extensive milieu of studies on children's morality in the classroom, this study focused on children's dialogic negotiation of the moral order of the peer group in a culturally and linguistically heterogeneous classroom. Broadly, the analysis highlights how classroom morality does not exclusively pertain to the institutional figure of the teacher. Children deploy various verbal and non-verbal resources to dialogically co-construct a moral standard on which basis all children are held accountable for their actions: specific behaviors are sanctioned and thereby constructed as morally inappropriate in the classroom context.

Three emblematic sequences have been discussed in the analysis. The first sequence (Ex. 1) revolved around a dyadic negotiation of the moral rule according to which all homework must be done. The norm was first implicitly evoked and then explicitly formulated to sanction a classmate who had not fulfilled her moral duty. Notably, the 'transgressor' aligned with the moral order made relevant by her classmate, providing an account to justify her conduct. Thus, through these dialogic practices children collaboratively co-constructed a specific moral order in which 'doing all homework' is the morally appropriate stance in the community. The second sequence (Ex. 2)

illustrated a dyadic conflict around the rule according to which water must not be wasted. Notably, the reproaching child constructed water (a) as a precious good *per se* and (b) as a collective good that other people might need. In this case, the reproach was followed by an open resistance to the moral order advanced by the ‘reprimander’. This resistance played out on the basis of a personal attack on the other classmate, who was constructed as having no moral right to sanction others. The third sequence (Ex. 3) illustrated a multiparty conflictual negotiation of the moral norm according to which all children must take part in collective duties. Faced with a classmate who refused to fulfill her duty, four children sanctioned her using various verbal and non-verbal resources, trying thereby to re-establish the primacy of collective duties over children’s individual freedom and will. In this case, the ‘transgressor’ initially resisted the moral order enforced by her classmates, and then seemingly aligned with it.

As it clearly emerges from this brief summary, the moral order of the peer group is bound to the moral standards and ideologies of the institution. Children co-construct a moral order which can be variously aligned or misaligned to the institutional one. On the one hand, the analysis illustrated how children might reproduce institutional moral discourses in the peer group, thereby acting as ‘spokesperson’ for the institution by voicing teachers’ talk with their classmates (e.g., in Ex 1). Through these polyphonic repetitions (Bazzanella 2011), children contribute to ratify and re-establish the institutional moral order, which gradually becomes shared and taken-for-granted in the classroom context. Notably, institutional moral ideologies are bound to broader moral discourses at the (inter)national level. Thus, the polyphonic character of this kind of practice concerns both local *and* broader discourses regarding the morally appropriate ways of behaving in our communities. On the other hand, the analysis also illustrated that children can resist this reproduction of institutional morality. For instance, children can voice institutional moral norms in order to mock them in front of other classmates (see Ex. 2). In general, children might explicitly reject their classmates’ sanctioning and openly transgress the institutional moral mandate. In some cases, this resistance is successful as it leads to the abandonment of the moral sanctioning, whereby the ‘transgressive’ behavior becomes accepted (or tolerated) by peers. These practices of resistance point to the local moral order as a *disputed* feature of classroom everyday life: the set of appropriate ways of behaving is potentially never settled, as it is the result of a continuous negotiation among children (at least when the teacher is not present).

The ties between children's morality-making practices and the institutional order render these kinds of practices especially relevant from a socializing perspective. When children reproduce the moral norms and ideologies of the institution, they also introduce their classmates to the moral expectations of the classroom context. First, children's voicing of moral norms could make other classmates aware that these norms are in place (and relevant in that specific situation). Second, this kind of practice puts a certain moral pressure for compliance on the recipients, who are urged to conform to institutional normativity and ideologies. This socializing work regards all children, regardless of their socioeconomic and cultural background. Nevertheless, these practices might be especially relevant in relation to those children who had recently started to attend the Italian school. For instance, the sequences presented in the analysis involve several children with a migratory background, who might have little knowledge of the moral expectations of the Italian classroom community. In this regard, if one of the central mandates of public schools is to create competent members of a single community, the analysis shows that the peer group plays a role in the process: through dialogic interactions with more competent peers, (non-native) children gradually undergo a process of socialization and standardization which is bound to the moral norms and ideologies of the new community they are now part of: out of their different linguistic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds, children are gradually introduced to (and contribute to shape) the moral standards of a single, shared community.

As the analysis illustrated, this socializing work is strictly intertwined with the negotiation of children's social relationships. By holding each other accountable for departures from a certain moral order, children co-constructed and disputed the social hierarchy of the peer group. Specifically, children voiced institutional norms in order to display their being 'good students' and construct the transgressors as morally reproachable, ascribing them a subordinate identity in the group hierarchy (see Nasi 2022c). Children's moral responsibility was indexed through various dialogic resources: the analysis highlighted how children might perform a moral accusation through deontic modal verbs ('must', see Ex. 3), lexical choice ('waste', Ex. 2; 'play', Ex. 3), use of the first name (Ex. 2 and 3), shifts in the pronouns ('you' vs. 'everybody', Ex. 2; 'we' vs. 'you', Ex. 3), repetitions (Ex. 3) higher volume (Ex. 3), and explicit mobilization of an adult figure as a threat (Ex. 1). On their part, the transgressors variously resisted this ascription of a problematic identity, either by defending their being 'good students' through an account or by rejecting the moral order advanced by their classmates. As shown in Ex. 3, these forms of resistance are

especially problematic in the case of an alliance of several children since negative ascriptions and assessments often rely on their ratification by other interlocutors in order to take hold (Garcia-Sanchez 2014). Specifically, the analysis illustrated how a ‘transgressor’ might face the alliance of two or more children, forcing on him/her the identity of the morally reproachable child. These alliances exert a powerful moral pressure on the recipient, who might be coerced to conform to the moral ideologies of the majority of the group in order to avoid being ascribed a despised identity among peers. Broadly, the analysis showed how the moral order of the classroom is one of the benchmarks around which children’s social organization and local identities are played out and disputed.

Overall, the study illustrated the relevance of children’s dialogic practices for the local management of the moral order of the classroom. In a context characterized by cultural and linguistic heterogeneity, children manage to ingeniously reproduce and negotiate institutional moral norms and ideologies: through various verbal and non-verbal resources, and through the joint management of the local participation framework, children jointly construct a locally relevant moral order on which basis children’s behaviors are discussed and evaluated. This peer-constructed moral order runs parallel to the adult one and is crucial to (a) children’s socialization to the moral expectations of the classroom and (b) children’s negotiation of their social organization and local identities. The relevance of the moral order of the peer group can hardly be underestimated: a significant part of children’s school hours is spent in interaction with their classmates, who also mediate the apprenticeship period of newcomers. As regards the latter, non-native children often have to deal with the moral order of the classroom *as reproduced by peers*, who play thus a central role in their socialization to the moral norms and ideologies of the new community.

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