

Managing knowledge in parent-teacher conferences: participants' resources to pursue different assessment trajectories

La gestione della conoscenza nei colloqui genitori-insegnanti: risorse comunicative e traiettorie valutative

Chiara Dalledonne Vandini

PhD in Education | Department of Educational Sciences "G.M. Bertin" | University of Bologna (Italy) | chiara.dalledonne2@unibo.it

Davide Cino

Phd Candidate in Education in Contemporary Society (Italy) | Department of Human Sciences for Education "Riccardo Massa" | University of Milano-Bicocca | d.cino1@campus.unimib.it

As institutional interactions, parent-teacher conferences are the "typical" milieu where teachers try to enact their professional oriented identity. This paper reports data from a mother-teachers conference where two teachers talk with a mother about the school achievements of her gifted child. Data were analyzed following the multimodal Conversation Analysis techniques. The authors advance that, as the interacting parts talk about the child, these social actors follow two different assessment trajectories. While teachers pursue a no-problem trajectory, constructing the "child-at-school" as a relatively non-problematic pupil, the mother pursues a problem trajectory by framing the troublesome "child-at-home". Analyses illustrate how the mother's communicative strategies allow her to act as a "final arbiter" of the conference, demanding and getting a customized education for her child.

Keywords

Parent-teacher conference, conversation analysis, assessment, gifted child performance, interpersonal communication

In quanto interazioni istituzionali, i colloqui tra genitori e insegnanti sono il "tipico" contesto in cui gli insegnanti cercano di mettere in pratica la loro identità professionale. Questo articolo riporta i dati di un colloquio in cui due insegnanti parlano con una madre dei risultati scolastici del figlio gifted. I dati sono stati analizzati seguendo il quadro teorico dell'analisi della conversazione nella sua versione multimodale. Gli autori sostengono che il genitore e le insegnanti seguono due diverse traiettorie di valutazione. Mentre le insegnanti perseguono una traiettoria positiva, costruendo il "bambino a scuola" come un alunno relativamente non problematico, la madre segue una traiettoria problematica inquadrando il "bambino a casa" come un bambino difficile da gestire. Le analisi illustrano come le strategie comunicative adottate dalla madre le permettano di agire come "arbitro finale" del colloquio e di ottenere un'educazione personalizzata per il figlio.

Parole chiave

colloqui tra genitori e insegnanti, analisi della conversazione, valutazione, rendimento dei bambini gifted, comunicazione interpersonale

1. Introduction

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) claims on the ecology of human development led to an impressive amount of research in child development exploring the ways in which children's primary social worlds (i.e. the family and the school) connect and create (or not) an osmotic ecological milieu where information circulates (see among others, Epstein, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Since then, mandatory and/or optional encounters between parents and teachers throughout the school year have been established in many countries as one of the major institutional loci where such an osmosis should take place (Christenson, Sheridan, 2001; Kim, Sheridan, Kwon, Koziol, 2013).

Within the general pedagogical frame defining these encounters as a common ground for family and school, their institutional aim is to communicate the evaluation of the child's school performance focusing on potential problems and ways to resolve them (Kotthoff, 2015). Not surprisingly, then, delivering and acknowledging assessment, performing and monitoring "assessment-relevant actions" (e.g. the construction of the "assessable", Goodwin, Goodwin, 1992, p. 156) and problem-talking are the most recurrent discursive actions participants in these institutional encounters engage in (Pillet-Shore, 2012, 2015).

As parent-teacher conferences (PTCs) are the cornerstone of the institutional communication between schools and families, a great amount of research has been devoted to analyzing teachers' and parents' perception as well as students' perceptions, mostly using self-report methodologies (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Epstein and Salinas, 2004; Milani, 2012). However, there are relatively few studies concerning how PTCs are accomplished as an interactive achievement. Namely, how participants (differently) construct the "assessable child", deliver and acknowledge the assessments, and achieve (or not) a common understanding of the child's status (see Baker, Keogh, 1995; Pillet-Shore, 2012, 2015; Kotthoff, 2015; Howard, Lipinoga, 2010; MacLure, Walker, 2000). Still, few of these studies have been carried out in Europe (Markstrom, 2009; Kotthoff, 2015).

Focusing on a mother talking with two primary school teachers about her gifted son, our case study explores how parents and teachers employ communication strategies to pursue their respective assessment trajectories. We advance that a detailed analysis of how the management of knowledge and the negotiation of epistemic authority take place in parent-teacher conferences will also help in critically rethinking some "pedagogical certainties" concerning school-family communication and their possible outcomes. Thus, we contend that – under certain circumstances – the contemporary enthusiasm towards the "empowered" parents can lead from the corrosion of the experts' territory of knowledge and the related epistemic authority, to the adoption of a "single pupil-oriented perspective" in classroom management (vs. the class-group).

We highlight how these social actors follow two different assessment trajectories, as they talk about the child. The teachers pursue a *no-problem* tra-

jectory, constructing the child-at-school as a relatively non-problematic pupil. The mother, in turn, pursues a *problem* trajectory, questioning the “unproblematic-child-at-school” and framing the troublesome “child-at-home”.

We also advance that the mother’s interactive competence and communicative strategies can explain why – in the ongoing construction of the assessable child – the mother’s problem-centered perspective gains over the teachers’ perspective, allowing her to shape the teachers’ professional conduct in the classroom and get a customized care for her “problematic” child. While the mother’s “problematization” of her son aims at getting an individualized educational approach by teachers, teachers’ “normalization” trajectory supports their professional mandate of balancing the “group-oriented” perspective and the individualized approach in managing their classroom work.

This paper seeks to investigate how parent-teachers’ conferences are managed by interacting actors with regard to the respective epistemic territories. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

R_{1a}: What type of communicative strategies are employed by the mother during the conference?

R₂: How are assessments and assessment-relevant actions (Goodwin, Goodwin, 1987) performed (e.g. who displays to have the right to assess what)?

2. Data collection and analysis

This paper reports on data from a broader study on parent-teacher conferences as an “interactive achievement” (Davitti, 2013) in Italian primary schools. Parent-teacher conferences occurring in two primary schools of a medium sized urban center in Centre and North Italy were videotaped (N= 46, lasting 10 minutes to 1 hour). The conferences involved 4 teachers and 46 parents (40 mothers and 6 fathers). Six of them were non-Italian native parents. The conferences concerned children of II, III, IV, V grades (i.e. aged 7-11). Seven of them were labeled as children with special needs. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form to take part in the study, in line with the Italian law n. 196/2003. Data were transcribed following Jefferson’s conversation analytic transcription conventions (2004) and were analyzed referring to Conversational Analysis theory and methods (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1974).

The detailed transcripts allowed us to capture specific details concerning social actions, which otherwise could be missed. In this paper we analyze excerpts from a conference concerning Carlo (fantasy name), a 9-year-old gifted child. Participating actors are his mother, his Italian language teacher and his Mathematics and Science teacher.

Although the single case under scrutiny concerns a child who has atypical performances and therefore findings cannot be generalized, it is precisely its particularities that makes it work as a “perspicuous setting” (Garfinkel, 2002) to sheds lights on the interactional constitution of a phe-

nomenon the more and more reported by the teachers: a loss of authority, a systematic de-legitimization of their role.

The study aims at contributing to the literature on parent-teacher conferences with a particular attention to how teachers and parents manage their identities and authority by constructing their assessments about the child. It also aims to shed light on the possible relationships between interactive competences and how moral and institutional identities are performed by participants in institutional interactions characterized by epistemic and social asymmetry (Heritage, 2012).

2.1 *Parents and teachers strategies to pursue an assessment trajectory*

In the realm of institutional interactions, parents and teachers meet to talk about the child, the home and the school, not really as objective but mostly as symbolic entities (see Baker, Keogh, 1995; Greenfield, Quiroz, Raeff, 2000). These entities' features are discursively crafted to be consistent with the aim of the institutional encounter (i.e. evaluating the child's school performances and progress) as well as the other activities accomplished through talk, e.g. projecting institutional relevant identities, blaming the interlocutor or justifying oneself. Building on a case study, this paper focuses on the interactional strategies used respectively by the mother and the teachers to pursue their assessment trajectory, with the goal of showing how this communicative strategies are correlated to the (de)construction of teachers' authority and how the mother, at the end of the conference, succeeds in shaping teachers' classroom work and choices. In this single case conference we find that while teachers show a "no-problem trajectory" by normalizing the pupils' problems and showing they are oriented to the whole classroom (professional point of view) the mother employes a "problem trajectory" by problematizing her child conduct and demanding a customized education (individualistic point of view).

The first index of such a pattern is merely quantitative. Positive assessments (either general e.g. "we are doing well"; "it's a positive moment", or local "he solved the task in his own way") are more frequent in the teachers' talk (i.e. 22 positive assessments out of 28 total assessments) than in the mother's speech (3 positive assessments out of 10). Negative assessments (i.e. "he is rushed"; "he is asleep") are less frequent and more mitigated in the teachers' talk than in the mother's talk (6/28 teachers' negative assessment vs. 7/10 mother's negative assessment). A second qualitative index concerns the practices through which participants pursue their different assessment trajectories. We identified four main practices enacted by the teachers and four practices enacted by parents in the data set:

Teachers' practices

1. Producing (lightly mitigated) positive assessments.
2. Using negative assessment as the background to underline progress.

3. Generalizing problematic behaviors to a person-category
4. Reducing the realm of negative assessment.

Parent's practices

1. Questioning the unproblematic child at school: “Back-to-the-problem questions”.
2. Problem-telling about the child-at-home by using reported speech;
3. Referring and quoting the expert voice.
4. Producing local or general negative assessments.

In this paper we focus on two interactional practices used by the mother with the aim of underlining how, by using communicative strategies that are somehow “hidden” in the interstices of talk, she becomes able to ask for a customized treatment for her child.

3. Findings

3.2 *Parent's strategies to pursue a problem trajectory*

Next, we show how this mother is able to employ communicative strategies to pursue her “problem trajectory”. Following, two of them are analyzed: the use of “reported speech”, and “quoting the expert”. In doing so, we shed light on the complexity of interpersonal communication, while providing a broader account of what happens during this specific PTC.

a. Use of reported speech to indirectly tell the teachers how to manage the child at school

Direct Reported Speech (DRS) is a way to take a stance by using the words of other people and in our case implicitly criticize teachers’ classroom conduct. In this excerpt we show how the mother indirectly criticizes and blame the teacher by using her child’s words.

(Excerpt 1)

Mum: Mother Ita: Italian teacher Mat: Math teacher

- 1 Mum: hum hum. then another thing he tells me when I
- 2 say “go over history, go over this, go over
- 3 that an: (0.3) “no (.), anyway: she doesn’t test us
- 4 Ita: no I do: test them
- 5 Mum: yes yes I do know. and: I say “no Carlo sorry,
- 6 the other kids”, because then the chats with the other moms are:
- 7 Ita: so you get the information
- 8 Mum: we get the information
- 9 Mat: (never mind... there’s hope)

- 10 Mum: “look that isn’t true, there is a test”
11 Ita: now last- -
12 Mum: “eh but I think Sabrina forgets, come on”
13 Ita: no then

Rather than being encapsulated in a larger storytelling environment and used to orient its climax (as in line 2), the instances of Directed Reported Speech in line 4 constitutes a minimal storytelling per se. The mother starts with a self-quote where she enacts herself as committed to supervising her son’s homework (see the iteration of reported imperatives, line 2). The use of the historical present tense and generic deictics frame the reported action as lasting, as if the mother this time was not reporting a specific event (like in 2) but rather a recurrent habit.

In doing so, she not only pursues her assessment trajectory by depicting Carlo as not studying at home (i.e. behaving in quite a problematic way), but she also stages her moral self and an institutional relevant identity: good enough parents are supposed to scaffold their children when accomplishing school tasks (see Pillet-Shore, 2012, 2015). Immediately after quoting herself exhorting her son, she voices him by saying «no, anyway she doesn’t test us» (line 3). The change in voice pitch underlines the relevance of the information and helps in differentiating the characters animated by the reported speech: an institutionally diligent mother, an irreverent pupil and a teacher who does not do what she is supposed to do. By quoting her son’s report on what happens – or rather doesn’t happen – in the classroom, the mother a) shows her relative second-hand access to the teacher’s epistemic territory; b) displays it as inspected/inspectable through the pupil’s testimony; c) depicts the teacher as accused/accusable of not doing what she is expected to do; d) makes her son’s testimony available for inspection by the teacher; e) makes it relevant for her to defend herself from the accusation indirectly implied in the pupil’s quoted testimony. Not coincidentally, the teacher takes the turn, disconfirms the child’s quoted statement and provides her first-hand version of what happens in the classroom («no, I do test them», line 4). The mother immediately affiliates with the teacher by agreeing with and confirming the teacher’s version by claiming pre-existing independent knowledge of the contested activity («yes = yes I do know», line 5). Through this expanded reply, she recognizes the teacher’s primary epistemic access to the “child-at-school” territory and downgrades her son’s credibility. In what follows, the mother goes on to quote herself engaged in disclaiming her son’s version (line 5) and persuading him that the teacher does carry out tests (line 10). In doing so, she shows she undermines her son’s credibility and pursues her affiliation with the teacher.

From a conversational point of view, both participants appear to agree upon the fact that the teacher does examine pupils and therefore treats the child’s quoted version as unreliable. However, by recurring to another instance of DRS, the mother comes back to her son’s version. By enacting his words – i.e. not using any quotation marker (Holt, Clift, 2007) – she says:

«but I think Sabrina forgets» (line 12). Despite having displayed her alignment to the teacher's version and having depicted herself as engaged in undermining her son's credibility, she uses his quote as if it reported a fact. The words are hearable as the boy's words, but the mother concealed behind the disclaimed words of her son, implies the possibility that the teacher is not examining Carlo's homework. Or at least, she implies that this is what her son assumes. In doing so, she makes it relevant for the teacher to discredit this morally loaded implication.

b. Mother's quoting expert's "voice" to judge and direct the teachers' classroom work

Generally in Parent-Teacher Conferences, pedagogical knowledge is deemed to be of teachers' competence. However, in our data, the mothers deploy an educational expertise, in line with previous findings showing that parents' pedagogical understanding is steadily increasing, going hand in hand with teachers' knowledge (Lareau, Weininger 2003; Horvart, Weininger, Lareau, 2003).

In this excerpt, the mother's expertise may be due to the child's giftedness, which may have led the parent to gain knowledge about her child's educational needs, and be actually more informed than the teachers. In the next excerpt, the mother refers to others external experts to judge and orient the teachers' job in class.

(Excerpt 2)

Ita: Italian teacher; Mum: Mother; Mar: Marina

- 1 Ita: so, I always noticed Carlo has a very good
- 2 preparation
- 3 Mum: >I know, I know<
- 4 Ita: so, I didn't notice he
- 5 didn't do his homework ((smiling))
- 6 Mum: no, but maybe you know, even on the basis of
- 7 —> what: we are told [by: experts like Marina
- 8 that-.)
- 9 Ita: [sure (.) correct
- 10 Mum: [we need to be heavy handed, get them used to
- 11 struggle, ^don't we Marina?
- ^look at Marina^
- 12 Mar: ((nods))

The Italian teacher opens her turn with a positive evaluation of the child «I always noticed Carlo has a very good preparation» (line 1-2) and pursue a no problem trajectory. While using the adverb of time «always» to stress the fact that the good behavior of the child is not isolated (temporal dimension), she also uses the verb “to notice”, referring to her first-hand experience. The mother replies with a «I know, I know» (line 3), as aiming to reduce the eva-

lative value of what the teacher is saying. Repeating twice the verb “to know” contributes to such questioning of the teacher’s epistemic authority, with the mother possibly indicating they can skip that part as she already knows about it. The teacher, in turn, explains herself highlighting that, given the student being always prepared, she never noticed he did not do his homework «so, I didn’t notice he didn’t do his homework» (line 4–5). The mother opens her turn with «no, but, maybe, you know» (line 6), where the use of «no, but» creates a distance, while «maybe» makes her words sound more kind and less normative. She goes on with «now, even on the basis of what we are told by experts» (line 6–7). The first plural person pronoun – an occurrence from the parents’ side of “the common ground interactive construction” (Katthoff, 2015) – includes the teacher among the addressees of the referred to expert talk. Not surprisingly then the teacher engages in simultaneous talk immediately after the completion of the first part of her turn (referring to the use of expert talk as a basis) with an upgraded agreement (sure) followed by a positive assessment (correct). Its sequential position (Goodwin, Goodwin, 1987) indicates what she agrees with and positively evaluates: not the expert’s talk – not yet quoted – but the conduct consisting in using the expert’s talk as a basis. Starting from this moment, the teacher commits herself to whatever the mother will say the expert would have said them. In the following component of the same turn, the mother evokes the present Marina as an expert herself, managing to create an even more polyphonic structure of participation where her voice would be nothing more than the sounding box of the expert talk. After this complex preface, she produces an occurrence of indirect reported speech (lines 10–11) through which she makes the quoted experts accountable for her request of being «heavy handed» when supervising Carlo’s homework. By making the experts saying that it is necessary to be more strict and accustom these children to work hard, she vicariously assesses the teacher’s behavior as inappropriate (in lines 1, 2, 4 and 5 the teacher declares that she assessed Carlo’s performance as good therefore she didn’t notice that he didn’t study). Asking for the expert to confirm what she says further de-authorizes the mother and identifies the “experts” as both the principal and the authors (Goffman, 1984) of mother’s words. The quick confirmation from the present expert legitimizes the mother’s indirect claim that gifted children – like her son – need stricter rules, more control and harder work. Quoting the “experts’ voice” 1) indirectly questions the teacher’s classroom conduct, 2) tells the teacher how to cope with this “special” gifted child. The mother’s interactive competence in navigating the multilayered epistemic landscape of this institutional event allows her to gain deontic rights (related to who decided what to do (see Stevanovic, Perakyla, 2012), ending up suggesting the teachers how to work in class, and succeeding in shaping their professional conduct.

3.3 *What child are we talking about?*

By deploying the abovementioned communicative strategies, the parent steers the conversation to the “home”, “her” epistemic territory, where she can claim her right to assess (Goodwin, Goodwin, 1987). First-hand knowledge can claim a superior right with respect to what is being assessed. Second-hand knowledge implies a mediated access, hence an inferior epistemic right (Heritage, Raymond, 2006). The parent demands a greater epistemic right, and in so doing she achieves two results: first, she orientates the conversation towards a problem trajectory. This leads to the emergence of the problematic child “at home” instead of an unproblematic child “at school”. Second, she capitalizes on the emergence of a symbolic problematic child to ask teachers for personalized and customize education, invading the school’s epistemic territory and the teachers’ expertise. The following excerpt presents a point at the end of the conference where the mother directly asks the teacher for individualized attention and care for her “problematic” child. The teacher commits herself in intervening according to the mother’s personal assessment of the child behavior.

(Excerpt 3)

Ita: Italian teacher Mum: Mother

- 1 Mum: =maybe we can insist on cert:ain things a little bit:
- 2 Ita: ^well, sure
^nods^.

The mother opens the turn saying «maybe» (line 1) which makes her sounds more gentle, compared to her directive statement. By saying “we can insist on certain things” (line 1) the mother is basically telling the teachers how to act in class with her child, invading their space. Baker and Keogh (1995) present a similar case, but where such statement is made by the teachers instead. The Italian teacher align herself with the mother’s words. In the next excerpt she reflects on a strategy to better deal with the child, referring to sending messages between the home and the school to reach a common strategy (Chena, Chena, 2015). Such a tactic is common in several conferences, like when children misbehave at school and parents and teachers try to cooperate to solve the problem (Baker, Keogh, 1995; Howard, Lipinoga, 2010; Markström, 2009).

(Excerpt 4)

Ita: Italian teacher Mum: mother

- 1 ita maybe you could send it to me, you know
- 2 like last time
- 3 actually after getting those texts, I used a heavier hand
- 4 big time. Carlo did you take notes of the homeworks?
- 5 Mum: mh hm
- 6 Ita: eh, yeah, no, but I did. no, I WANT TO SEE THE PAGE.

- 8 hm: oh no, I only took a quick note. no that
 9 is not enough
 10 <rewrite them, properly, just like all of your classmates do.>
 11 Mum: good job, thank you

With the sentence «maybe you can send it to me, like last time» (line 1-2), the teacher tries to reach a common strategy to cooperate with the mother in order to solve domestic, more than scholastic, problems. She continues her turn aligning herself with the mother and telling her that after their exchange –beyond school– she tried to pay more attention to the child in class. By using her and the child’s reported speech, she represents herself as morally responsible to child’s classroom behavior “indeed, after getting those textes I used a heavier hand, big time. Carlo, did you take notes of the homework?” (line 3-4), «“mhm, yeah, no, I did. No, I WANT TO SEE THE PAGE» (line 6-7), “ehm, No, I only took a quick note. No, that is not enough» (line 8-9), «rewrite them properly, just like all of your classmates do» (line 10). The use of “after” indicates that this course of action is not the result of an autonomous choice of the teacher, but it follows the mother’s requests. Hence, in this case, the teachers are the ones who are adapting their actions in light of the mother’s perceived difficulties and problems. Baker and Keogh (1995) describe case an opposite case. In their data the teachers observe the child’s difficulties at school and the parent commit himself to adjust his behavior at home (verifying if the child has done his homework) to improve his child’s scholastic situation. In Baker and Keogh’s, teachers’ recommendations were aimed at creating a bridge between the work done at school and at home. This was conceptualized in the expression «curriculum for the home» (p. 279), describing the morally responsible actions that parents may take at home to sustain their child’s learning. In our study, in turn, we are faced with a “curriculum for the school”, where teachers adjust their behavior according to the mother’s assessment trajectory and requests. The mother positively evaluate the teachers by saying “god job, thank you” (line 11), which confirms her increasing epistemic authority to the point where she can assess the teacher’s job.

4. Conclusions: curriculum for the home or curriculum for the school?

During this PTCs, teachers and parents use several communicative strategies to pursue their own assessing trajectories. Within this study we focus on a mother’s communicative strategies that allow her to demand a customized education for her son. The mother follows a *problem trajectory*, openly criticizing the child’s behavior, without using mitigators and depicting a troublesome “child-at-home”. In this sense, we analyzed two of her strategies with the goal of shedding light on the way she succeeds in shaping the teachers’ school conduct: 1. using the reported speech, 2. quoting the expert’s “voice”. Not only do the speakers talk about their own epistemic territories

(the home for the mother and the school for the teachers), but also refer to a specific pedagogical expertise.

Teachers, indeed, refer to the pedagogical expertise they rely on daily. At the same time, the role of the expert can help determining the final arbiter. Such knowledge is particularly relevant in PTCs, and generally proper of the teachers. However, the parent refers to an external expertise to judge the teachers' conduct. It is through this knowledge that the mother's epistemic authority increases. This way, the mother becomes the "final arbiter" of the conversation, with two results: 1) expressing her evaluative trajectory: "the child at home" as a problematic student which questions the no-problem trajectory supported by teachers; 2) suggesting the teachers a course of actions, creating a sort of "curriculum for the school"¹.

In doing so, the mother showed agency handling epistemic territories even when that meant overstepping her role. Being able to manage conversation and reclaim one's positions may have a positive connotation within a discourse on parental empowerment.

However, taking a more critical stand, criticisms can be found. As this study shows, it may happen that experts and competent parents become children's advocates, critical of teachers' conduct, and able to ask for personalized and individualized teaching strategies, invading the school's and teacher's epistemic territories. In this respect, Lareau and Weininger's work (2003) is worth mentioning, as it shows how middle-class parents are increasingly able to challenge and criticize teachers and ask for tailor-made interventions for their children. The authors stress a problematic face of parental empowerment, as contributing to further inequalities between middle and lower classes. This occurs because – according to them – middle-class parents are more competent when it comes to discussing with teachers, thus more able to direct the conversation and guarantee tangible benefits to their children, compared to working-class parents. Reflecting on both positive and problematic aspects of parental empowerment might be a promising venue of inquiry in order to tackle these differences and better understand the reasons why parents may invade teachers' epistemic territories.

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1 Baker and Keogh (1995) talk about teachers' recommendation to parents in order to improve and continue the work started at school, in line with a "curriculum for the home": all of those indications for parents to sustain their children's improvement within the epistemic territory of the home.

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