Negotiating epistemic authority in parent-teacher conferences: non-native parents reclaiming agency against the backdrop of linguistic and cultural differences

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Abstract. In this paper we analyze the degree of participation, epistemic management, and authority performance during Parent-Teacher Conferences with non-native parents. Studies focusing on ethnic minority communities illustrate the dominance of the teacher's epistemic authority (see Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Garcia-Sanchez and Orellana, 2007). Describing differences in mastering both the expert and the institutional knowledge, Howard and Lipinoga (2010) illustrate how immigrated parents remain relatively silent during the report phase of the encounter. This paper reports data from eight parent-teacher conferences with non-native parents. We show how parents' practices to accomplish and receive assessment confirm in part what has already been identified by the literature, but also adds new communicative "nuances". We contend that also non-native parents could be able to challenge the teachers' authority by questioning them and making the information from their territory of knowledge (i.e. the "child-at-home") relevant. We advance that a detailed analysis of how the management of knowledge and the negotiation of epistemic authority occur in parent-teacher conferences, will also help in critically rethinking some "pedagogical certainties" concerning school-family communication and their possible outcomes.

Keywords. Epistemic Authority - Knowledge Management - Conversation Analysis - Parent-Teacher Conferences - Non-Native Parents

1. Introduction

Parent engagement in children's academic life has been defined as a broad range of activities where parents can act as advocates of and contributors to their children's education by partnering with teachers and schools (Edwards & Kutaka, 2015). Such a climate of collaboration can function as a remarkable variable in supporting children's academic motivation and school performance (Sanders & Epstein 2000). Overall research

suggests that, if supported, a relationship of trust between the school and the family can increase students' individual and social wellbeing and academic success, with positive effects on self-esteem, classroom behavior, and better relational and social skills (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bruïne et al., 2018).

In this sense, parent-teacher conferences (PTCs) afford a great opportunity to establish and foster a positive partnership between the school and the family (Epstein & Salinas, 2004; MacLure & Walker, 2000; Pillet-Shore 2015; 2016). Thus, PTCs focused on students' academic performance (Baker & Keogh, 1995) can be considered as an interactional space for parents and teachers to share information, opinions and worries concerning children's school life (Addimando, 2013; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Davitti, 2013; De Moulin 1992). It is during these interactional encounters that parents and teachers aim to construct a common ground to discuss the child and his/her systemic transitions from the home to the school (Davitti, 2013).

In this context, participants pay a great deal of attention to the way social roles, institutional identities, and authority are negotiated, using these institutional encounters to manage their impression (Goffman, 1959) as "good parents" and "good teachers" (Baker & Keogh, 1995). Boundaries are then implicitly established in terms of how to reciprocally assess their roles, with parents being recognized as responsible of the child-at-home, and teachers being accountable for the child-at-school (Baker & Keogh, 1995; Davitti, 2013; Pillet-Shore, 2012).

The act of managing knowledge and legitimating the description/assessment of the state of things is crucial during interactions and allows speakers to negotiate their identity (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage & Clayman, 2010; Heritage & Raymond, 2006; 2012). Unsurprisingly, when talking, people are sensitive to what they have a right to know and say about their recipients (Chafe & Nichols 1986; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992; Kamio 1997, Stivers 2005; Willett 1988).

Parents and teachers commit to construct a common ground of norms to objectively assess the child, his/her performance and shared educational frames (Cedersund & Svensson, 1996; Kotthoff, 2015), based on a shared knowledge of artifacts, norms, and beliefs (Clark, 1996). However, working together as partners to implement an effective communication to address issues and foster change is not always easy (Bobetsky 2003; Christenson & Sheridan 2001; Davitti, 2013).This is true not only for people who share the same language and cultural background, but especially for those with a different socio-cultural status, a different language, and different educational perspectives (Desimone, 1999).

Studies investigating the relationship between school-family partnership and academic success (Coleman, 1997) suggest that some non-native parents experience feelings of discomfort and helplessness when interacting with teachers (Granata, Mejeri, & Rizzi, 2015). These parents tend not to feel at ease expressing their concerns (Adair & Tobin, 2008; De Gioia, 2008; Hadley) and like they are only considered when children misbehave at school or show difficulties learning, with teachers attributing these problems to the family (Bove & Mantovani, 2015). On the other hand, cases have been reported where non-native parents avoid communication with teachers in order not to appear intrusive (Garcìa, 1990; Vanderbroeck, Boonart, Van Der Mespel, & Brabandere, 2009). At the same time, teachers may also feel vulnerable and struggle with parents with a different background, experiencing difficulties in managing the school-family relationship (Pianta, 2001; Zaninelli, 2014).

In the realm of school-family interactions, when it comes to non-native parents institutional barriers and communication skills intertwine. An additional layer of difficulties is added by the "invisible barriers" (Lightfoot, 2003) of a different linguistic and cultural background (Bove & Mantovani, 2015), as implicit cultural models come into play in PTCs, which can engender misunderstandings (Elbers & de Haan, 2014).

Consistent with and informed by the literature reported above, we focus on this paper on eight video-recorded PTCs with non-native parents in Italy, to explore how such an institutional interactions take place and is shaped by interacting parts. Using a Conversation Analysis approach (Jefferson, 2004) we analyze the interactional practices adopted by non-native parents.

First, we analyze the communicative occurrences confirming what previous studies on PTCs with non-native parents found presenting examples of sequences where non-native parents react to teachers' long turns using *silence* or *minimal feedback* (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Garcia-Sanchez & Orellana, 2007; Howard & Lipinoga, 2010).

We then observe teachers using a *third turn* in response to non-native parents using a *long turn* (Orletti, 2000).

Finally, we report on parents' use of some communication strategies that traditionally have been attributed to native parents (see Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Specifically, we will focus on a communicative strategy – i.e. *challenging* teachers' authority and responsibility- that has been traditionally attributed to native parents in the literature (Lareau & Weininger, 2003), but that in our data was employed by a non-native parent showing institutional and dialogical competence.

2. Literature review

2.1 The organization of interaction in PTCs with non-native parents

A number of studies investigating PTCs with non-native parents shed light on some differences in terms of participation and management of the epistemic authority linked to different ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Garcia-Sanchez & Orellana, 2007; Howard & Lipinoga, 2010; Kotthoff, 2015; Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

As this type of communication takes place within an institutional context (i.e. the school), conferences are marked by an asymmetry between the participants in terms of managing the interaction (Orletti, 2000). Because of this institutional nature, people representing the institution and holding more power and authority are expected to take the lead in deciding what perspectives and topics will be discussed during the interaction (Orletti, 2000).

Some scholars found that a different level of familiarity with the institutional frameworks and different linguistic skills can lead non-native parents to experience misunderstandings when communicating with teachers (Howard & Lipinoga, 2010; Weininger & Lareau, 2003). These authors stressed how non-native parents are at risk of being ill equipped with the communication skills necessary to jointly construct and negotiate the interaction. In light of these findings, PTCs can reproduce the inequalities these parents live outside the school (Howard & Lipinoga, 2010). However, the inequality structures that can influence the school-family relationship are mutually reproduced and potential-

ly transformed by interacts during the interaction itself (Blommaert, 2005). It is, indeed, by joining these conferences that constructing a positive partnership becomes possible (Howard & Lipinoga, 2010).

Prior works reported that during PTCs teachers tend to be the ones who more frequently use long turns during the conference and adopt a "third turn" (Garcia-Sanchez & Orellana, 2007; Howard and Lipinoga, 2010; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). The "third turn" (Orletti, 2000) is generally employed to comment, assess, and judge someone/something. Thus, the interactional, semantic, and strategic asymmetry of the teacher can determine how the conference will evolve (Linell & Luckmann, 1991). Additionally, teachers enact their "professional vision" by using an institutional language (i.e. "school jargon"), that non-native parents may have a hard time understanding (Goodwin, 1994).

The abovementioned body of literature also reports that while native parents tend to challenge teachers emplying expert knowledge (Lareau & Weininger, 2003), while non-native parents tend to be more silent and give minimal feedback (often using "continuers" see Schegloff, 1982). **Table 1** schematically summarizes these strategies.

Table 1. **Teachers and parents communication strategies during PTCs**.

Teachers	Non-native parents	Native middle-class parents
Long turn Third turn School jargon	Silence Minimal feedback or continuers	Challenge (Weininger and Lareau, 2003) Expert and institutional knowledge (Weininger and Lareau, 2003)

3. Method

This paper reports data from a broader project studying PTCs as interactive achievements in Italian Primary Schools. Our full dataset consists of 46 video-recorded PTCs, lasting from 10 to 50 minutes, occurring in two primary schools located in two medium-sized urban centers in Central and North Italy. Conferences involved 4 teachers, and 46 parents. Among the parents, 41 were mothers and 7 fathers; 6 of them were not-Italian native. This information was collected when parents signed the informed consent form for videotaping. Conferences concerned children of II, III, IV, and V grade (i.e. aged 7-11). Seven children were labeled as having special education needs. Participants' consent was gained according to the Italian Personal Data Protection Code n.196/2003.

The focus of *this* contribution is on eight video-recorded PTCs with non-native parents with children of III and IV grade. Data were transcribed using the Conversation Analytic Transcription conventions developed by Jefferson (2004). Such an analytic approach was deemed appropriate as conversation analysis allows researchers to shed light on the fine details of humans interaction that sometimes could be hidden in the interaction itself (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974)

4. Results

4.1 Teachers long turns and non-native parents' silence/minimal feedback

The following excerpts report on two primary school teachers (T1 and T2) interacting with a non-native mother (P) during a PTC occurred in April 2017 in a primary school in center Italy. We focus on the assessment of the child (Miluna, fantasy name) who, although being academically successful, behaves inconsistently with teachers' expectations in terms of classroom participation.

Excerpt 1
T1: Italian teacher; T2: Math teacher; P: Parent

```
8    T1    E come sappiamo il problema di Miluna=
           And as we know Miluna's problem

9    T2    [mmh
           [mmh

10   T1    = è che partecipa poco
           = is that she doesn't participate that much

11   P                                                    ((sorride))
                                                          ((smiles))

12   T1    ci sta provando=
           she is trying=

13   P     [Hhh e si io (   ) tutti i giorni)
           [Hhh yeah everyday (    ) I)

14   T2                                                   ((annuisce))
                                                          ((nods))

15   T1    Già solo questa cosa, che lei, prova a
           Even just the fact that she tries to

16         partecipare ad Alzare la mano di più già noi
           participate and raises her hand we

17         siamo Comunque=
           are=

18   T2    [SI certo
           [Sure

19   T1    =più contente
           =happier

20   P                                                    ((annuisce))
                                                          ((nods))

21   T1    Anche perché è vero Miluna è un:a bimba timida
           And it is true, Miluna is a: shy child

22         però quando vuole chiacchiera tantissimo hhhh
           but when she wants she chats a lot hhhh
```

T1 "criticizes" (Pillet-Shore, 2016) the child's lack of participation "And as we know Miluna's problem is that she doesn't participate that much" (lines 8-10), which is confirmed by a signal of alignment of T2 "mmh" (line 9). In her turn, the mother does not say a word and only smiles, leaving room for T1 who goes on with her assessment claiming that, after all, the child is trying to work on her involvement during classes "she is trying" (line 12).

On her part, P (re)presents herself as a good parent (Pillet Shore, 2015) who is aware of and dealing with the situation, constantly trying to invite the child to be more present in class. By agreeing with T "Yeah everyday I" (line 13) the mother claims prior knowledge of the problem, stressing that she is trying to tackle the situation.

T1 then reviews her assessment, and her at first problematic evaluation becomes a more positive one: "Even just the fact that she tries to participate and raises her hand, we are happier" (lines 15-19).

In this new version, the child's behavior in T1's words is described by teachers as appropriate: the student raises her hand in line with the expectations. Additionally, using the "we" particle, T1 indicates that both teachers share the same view and values in terms of assessment. Indeed, T2 aligns with her colleague in line 18 –"sure"- confirming and reinforcing the assessment.

In response to that, the mother nods and T1 adds an additional explanation to back her assessment.

The child is "talked into being" as "shy" (line 21), but it is also assumed that "when she wants she chats a lot" (line 22), without mentioning what teachers mean with "shyness".

In the next excerpt (n.2) of the same conference, following some more exchanges, T1 goes back to her assessment with a summary assessment to institutionally frame the situation –"So, all jokes aside" (line 34) and focuses on the institutional goal of the interaction.

Excerpt n.2

T1: Italian teacher; T2: Math teacher; P: parent

```
    34  T1   Allora (0.5) mhz niente a parte gli scherzi
             So (0.5) mhz all jokes aside

    35       adesso lei ha delle grandi capacità=
             now she is very skilled=

    36  P                                          ((Annuisce    con
                                                   lo       sguardo
                                                   basso))
                                                   ((Nods    looking
                                                   down))

    37  T2   anche in matematica vedo che. È brava si
             even in Math I see she's good

    38       impegna=
             she works hard=

    39  P                                          ((annuisce))
                                                   ((nods))

    40  T2   in scienze studia=                    ((rivolgendosi a
             she applies herself in Science        T2))
                                                   ((referring   to
                                                   T2))

    41       =quindi [comunque
             =so      [anyway

    42  T1          [si si
                    [yes yes
```

```
43        anche la comprensione legge –hle cose le
          even with text comprehension when she reads
          something –she does

44        Capisce
          Get it

45  P                                               ((Annuisce   con
                                                    lo      sguardo
                                                    basso))
                                                    ((Nods   looking
                                                    down))

46  T1    ed è un peccato (0.3)
          and it's a pity (0.3)

47  P                                               ((Annuisce   con
                                                    lo      sguardo
                                                    basso))
                                                    ((Nods   looking
                                                    down))

48  T1    magari vedere che lei è così=
          you know to see her like that=

49  P                                               ((Rivolge
                                                    velocemente   lo
                                                    sguardo a T1))
                                                    ((Quickly  looks
                                                    at T1))

50  T1    =silenziosa che non alza la mano
          =quiet not raising her hand
```

As the mother just provides minimal feedback in the form of nods without making eye contact (Schegloff, 1982; Stivers, 2008), teachers account for the student's skills by making "list" of positive assessments (Pillet-Shore, 2016). She is good with Math "even in Math I see she's good" (line 37), "she works hard" (line 38), "she applies herself in Science" (line 40), and "even with text comprehension when she reads something –she does get it" (lines 43-44). This way, teachers start by referring to the child's positive qualities before focusing on behavioral problems (see lines 46, 48, 50)

As these skills are acknowledged and reported to the mother, the student is also framed as quiet and lacking participation (e.g. by raising her hand). In these two excerpts, most of the times as the teachers end their turns the mom just nods, in line with the literature (Weininger and Lareau, 2003; Davitti, 2013). There is only one occurrence where the mom answers, trying to show her involvement in the life of the child "everyday… I" (ex 1, line 13), following the "good parent" cultural model implicitly negotiated during the conference.

These excerpts (ex. 1 and ex. 2) –concerning the teachers' long turns and the silence/minimal feedback of the non-native parent- can be conceived as classic examples of what the literature has described as typical conversational moves of non-native parents taking part in PTCs (Elbers & de Haan, 2014; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). In the first and second excerpts, as the teachers report on the child's educational achievements and classroom behavior (ex. l.), the mom answers with very few words, lots of silences and nods, often looking down without making eye contacts with the teachers (ex. l. lines 11 and 20, ex. 2 lines 36, 39, 45,47,49). In the next section we

analyze excerpts where parents make extended turns of talk and the teachers reserve the right to assess what parent says.

4.2 Non-native parent's long turns followed by teachers' third turn

Excerpt n.3 reports on an exchange between two primary school teachers (T1 and T2) and a non-native father that took place in April 2017 in a primary school of center Italy. What is peculiar of this interaction is the father who, performing an extended turn of talk composed by multiple "turn contractions units" [1](Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974) is able to occupy a large portion of communicative space.

In this excerpt, T1 is telling the father about her choice concerning homework for the holidays, closing the sentence saying that "he needs to commit" (lines 269-270). This way, T1 is stressing that her job is done and that the success in the task it's up to the student and his parents from now on.

Excerpt n.3
T1: Italian teacher; T2: Math teacher P: Parent

```
267   T1   Solo un libro io do perché siccome stiamo a
           I only give him a book because since we stay at

268        casa pochi giorni gli darò un libro che lui
           home for a few days I'll just give him a book he

269        riesce a leggere non tanto difficile però deve
           can read not very difficult but he needs to

270        Applicarsi
           Commit

271   P    Lo tengo lo tengo non ti preoccupare
           I got this I got this don't worry

272   T2   [Invece di matematica
           [On the other hand, with respect to Math

273   P    [però quando c'è compiti
           [but when there is homework

274   T1   Hhhh
           Hhhh

275   P    Quando c'è qualcosa di e mi frega di pagine
           When there is something to do and he fools me with the pages

276        [Che non so che deve fare (2.0)
           [Which I don't know he has to do (2.0)

277   T1   [Lì fa il furbo
           [He tries to cheat there

278   T2   [In matematica
           [In math

279   P    [Perché a volte lui quando c'è
           [Because he sometimes when there is

280        ( ) io come l'ho [capito=
           ( ) that's how I [you know=
```

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[1] A TCU is a fundamental unit of speech (e.g., a sentence; a word) out of which a speaker may construct a turn-at-talk in conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).

```
281   T1                    [Abbiam capito
                            [We get it

282   P     =quando c'è tanti impegni (1.0) lui prende
            =when there are lots of things to do (1.0) he takes

283         un libro che l'ha fatto due mesi, cinque mesi fa
            a book he did two, five months ago

284   T1    Certo
            Of course

285   P     Avanti di- quando non ci siamo noi (1.0)
            Ahead of- when we are not around (1.0)

286   T1    Si
            Yes

287   P     E sta compilando per niente
            And he's filling with no reason

288   T1    Sì
            Yes

289   P     E lo chiedo io quando vengo, c'è da fare? Sì
            And I ask when I come, is that to do? Yes

290         l'ho fatto mi ha visto mamma io lo chiedo mamma
            I did it, mom saw it I ask mom

291         povera non sa non capisce neanche che fa perché
            poor thing she doesn't know she doesn't even get what he is doing
            because

292         non capisce l'italiano m- ANCHE SE CAPISCE
            she can't speak Italian b-even when she gets something

293         se ti dice questo ciò da fare
            if he says this is what I have to do

294   T1    Eh sisi ma infatti [non è colpa della mamma
            Yes, yes, actually [it's not his mom's fault

295   P                        [Io non sono stato qua
                              [I haven't been around

296         Non sono stato qua
            I haven't been around

297   T2    Certo
            Sure

298   T1    Eh
            Eh
```

The father, in turn, shows his commitment as in line 271 "I got this I got this don't worry" by presenting himself as a "good parent", willing to support teacher's expectations (Pillet Shore, 2012; 2015). But, as T2 tries to talk about the homework for the holidays, she is "interrupted" (Nofsinger, 1991) by the father who keeps to talk to T1, "but when there is homework" (line 273), starting the new sentence with the adversative conjunction "but", aimed at expressing contrast between two statements, to justify his doing. This could have happened because the father felt intimidated by T1 saying the child "needs to commit" (lines 269-270), which could have meant that the he has not really committed so far.

The father aims to highlight that it is not parents' fault that the child has not committed, but to the child's himself who "fooled" him (lines 275-276): "when there is

something to do and he fools me with the pages which I don't know he has to do". This way he admits he cannot easily stay informed about the homework. Through a "recap formulation" (Orletti, 2000, p.70) T1 formulates the father's words concerning the child's behavior (Orletti 1994, p.351) as in line 277 "he tries to cheat there", summarizing what the father has been saying to interpret his actions and make sense of what it's being told. This upshot formulation shows what T1 got from the father's words, without expecting a feedback in return. Such a communicative action is only apparently neutral. By summarizing what the other person in interaction has just said, T1 is stressing what she deems to be significant and relevant for the interaction (Orletti, 2000). The father and T1 agree on the child's sharp behavior and even when T2 tries again to talk about her math homework (line 278), the father continues telling about the ways the child fools him: "when there are lots of things to do he takes a book he did two, five months ago" (line 282-283).

T1 tries to interrupt the father saying "we get it" (line 281), using the plural to include the perspective of T2. As the father goes on, T1 just provides minimal feedbacks ("of course", "yes", "yes", lines 284, 286, 288) until P refers to the mother's responsibility in checking the homework, who is not present in the conference (lines 289-293). In his words, P represents himself as concerned about checking his child did his homework when he gets home "and I ask when I come" (line 289), reporting the child's answer as a reported speech "I did it, mom saw it" (line 290).

As a further step to ensure the child did his homework, the father asks the mother "I ask mom" (line 290), showing the teachers that he thoroughly and responsibly fulfill his duties by checking what the child said. He then goes on with his story talking about the mother "poor thing, she doesn't even get what he is doing because she can't speak Italian, even when she gets something if he says this is what I have to do" (lines 291-293). The mother is framed, in father's words, as attentive and involved with her child's school life, but with no means to play her role of a good parent thoroughly, because of the language, but most of all because of the child not being honest with her.

From this excerpt not the father –as an attentive inspector- nor the "poor" mother –who doesn't speak Italian- are responsible for the homework. It is the child himself who should be held accountable, as the one who knows about the homework. Even if the mother's understanding of Italian was better, it would still be the child's responsibility to know and tell his parents about the homework to do.

T1 agrees with P that the mother is not responsible for that "yes, yes, actually it's not his mom's fault" (line 294), using a third turn summarizing the reported situation. The father goes on with his account by saying twice "I haven't been around" (lines 295-296), stressing that it is not his fault if the child did not do his homework, as supported by T1 and T2's third turns "sure" and "eh" (lines 297, 298).

The next excerpt reports on a mother talking about her twins' school performance, showing how the teacher uses a third turn to assess the parent's conduct.

Excerpt 4
T= Teacher P= Parent

```
    81    T       è quest-questa cosa]quindi dopo tutto che gli
                  it's thi-this thing] then, after all that we

    82            abbiamo detto  hh quello che abbiamo detto su
                  we told hh him what we told about

    83            S che gliele abbiamo dette di t-cotte e di
                  We told him all sort of

    84            crude alla fine forse lui (0.2)è che quello che
                  things, in the end maybe he (0.2) is the one who

    85            ha attualmente tra i due ehm sta più attento (.) e
                  right now pays more attention of the two of them (.) and

    86            partecipa di più ecco. M cerca di fare meno
                  is more involved. M tries to do the least

    87            possibile ecco.
                  He can do.

    88    P       molto. E anche[oggi me lo ha detto la Chiara=
                  a lot. And even [today Chiara told me about it=

    89    T       [corrisponde corrisponde (anche con quello che
                  [it's the same it's the same (of what you

    90            avete visto voi)]
                  you saw)]

    91    P       =che per esempio lui non dice] non ho capi'
                  =that for example he doesn't say]I didn't get

    92            non capisce qualcosa
                  he doesn't get something

    93    T       Eh
                  Eh

    94    P       lui non ha capito
                  he didn't get it

    95    T       Certo
                  Of course
```

In the excerpt above the teacher is comparing the two children assessing their behavior (lines 81-87). After listening to this assessment, the mother confirms and assesses herself what the teacher just said "a lot" (line 88). Such a move is unusual for a non-native mother if compared to the literature on non-native parents describing them as silent and submissive (Garcia-Sanchez & Orellana, 2007; Helbers & de Haan, 2014; Howard & Lipinoga, 2010; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Furthermore, this mother provides a proof to support her assessment, reporting a discourse with another teacher "And even today Chiara told me about it" (line 88).

The teacher immediately replies, talking over the mother "it's the same, it's the same of what you saw" (line 89-90), showing not only she is aware that her opinion and her colleague's overlap, but further corroborating her point of view as something widely supported.

Such an overlap though doesn't discourage the mother who, in turn, keeps on talking about one of her children's behavior at school as told by apparently another tea-

cher "that for example he doesn't say I didn't get, he doesn't get something" (line 91-92). As the mother presents herself as involved and knowledgeable about the child at school, showing competence on the teacher's epistemic territory, the teacher moves toward the third turn.

Even though she pronounces less words, and despite allowing the mother to decide the topic of conversation, with her assessment the teacher highlights that it is her place to confirm/disconfirm the legitimacy of the mother's words, re-establishing the conversational asymmetric order.

In the third and fourth excerpts, focusing on parent's long turns followed by teachers' third turns, we observed a different way for parents to manage and negotiate the epistemic authority during the conference. Particularly, in the third excerpt, our data show a father engaged in a conversation with teachers where the conversational management is quite aligned with the literature (Garcia-Sanchez & Orellana, 2007; Howard & Lipinoga, 2010; Lareau & Weininger, 2003) as following his words are always further assessment and approvals from the teachers (ex. 3 lines 277,284, 294).

In the fourth excerpt, in turn, it is the mother who manages the conversation producing long turns, while the teacher is constantly overlapping, assessing, confirming and taking part in the mutual construction of the interaction by showing that she is "allowing" the mother to talk with her recurring third turns. By doing so, while the teacher leaves room for the mother to talk, she is also defending her epistemic authority by assessing what the parent says (Ruusuvuori & Perakyla, 2009). This is in line with Orletti's account (2000) on the nature of assessment as a (possible) manifestation of authority. The mother too, though, confirms and assesses some of the teacher's moves, showing how both the interaction and the legitimacy of expressing one's opinion come from a continuous negotiation between the interacting parts. In this context, this suggests that non-native parents' minor, if not lacking, participation to the epistemic management of the interaction is not to be taken for granted. In the next paragraph we present the analysis of a conference where a non-native mother is able to contest and challenge the teachers' authority, even if she doesn't master Italian.

4.3 Challenging the teachers' authority

In an educational environment, challenge is defined as the ability of parents to question the work of teachers (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). The next excerpt reports on a conference between a non-native mother (P), an Italian teacher (T1) and a math teacher (T2) occurred in a primary school located in center Italy. In this excerpt it is possible to detect two communicative moves that have been described as typical of native parents in the literature (Garcia-Sanchez & Orellana, 2007; Howard & Lipinoga, 2010; Lareau & Weininger, 2003), as able to question teachers' authority. These parents are framed as their children's "advocate", contesting and "challenging" teachers' assessments (Weininger & Lareau, 2003).

Excerpt n.5

```
149   P      (0.2)oh ma adesso però con i compiti,ci
             (0.2)talking about the homework, are

150          sono pochi compiti da scuola a casa? O lui
             is there less homework to do? Or is it

151          proprio deve leggere e non legge?
             Just him who doesn't do it?

152   T1     Ah, questo me lo devi dire tu!
             That's something you have to tell me!

153   T2         [Hhh
                 [Hhh

154   T1     Io li [       do i compiti
             I do  [       give homework to do

155   P          [tu li dai i compiti?
                 [Do you?

156   T1     Si! Hhh
             Yes I do! Hhh

157   P      Eh lui, e li fa in un secondo!
             He, he does it in a second!
```

In this excerpt it is the mom who makes "strong moves" (Orletti, 2000), attempting an interactional dominance (Linell & Luckmann, 1991), which allows to control the conversation by controlling the sequential organization using "strong moves" like starting a sequence, asking a question, or changing the subject (Orletti, 2000).

Although being in an institutional context, the mother challenges the typical conversational asymmetry by explicitly asking the teacher about the job she is supposed to do: "is there less homework to do? Or is it just him who doesn't do it?" (lines 150-151).

T1 tries to get back control in line 152, saying "that's something you have to tell me!" Instead of directly addressing the question like it would be the case in a traditional adjacency pair (Sidnell, 2010), T1 clarifies the roles and the context where the conversation is taking place. Namely, the teacher reiterates with a formulation that she is the one with the authority to talk about that topic (line 152), restoring some basic rules. Hence, it is T1 who directs this institutional interaction by picking up the topics of conversation, making strong moves and having the last say on how to manage epistemic rights if they don't confirm to the expectations. In this case, T1 deems appropriate not to address the mother's question and reiterate, through a formulation ("that's something you have to tell me!"), that it is the mother who has to be held accountable for the child's homework. If T1 answered the mother, she would implicitly legitimate the possibility for her to raise questions about her work conduct, endorsing the parent's behavior which is violating the implicit contract of concealed assessment of their competences (Davitti, 2013).

T1 goes on saying: "I do give homework to do" (line 154) to confirm she is doing her job properly. The mother, in turn, asks back "do you?" (line 155) and the teacher firmly answers with a "Yes I do" (line 156). The mom follows saying "he does it in a second" (line 157), which explains the reason of the question that was asked in lines 149-151.

The following excerpt shows a similar "challenge" between two teachers (T1 and T2) and a non-native mother (P).

Excerpt n.6

T1: Italian teacher; T2: Math teacher; P: parent

```
190    T1    Hhhh, è chiaro che poi a lungo andare avrà
             Hhhh, it's clear that in the long term he will

191          bisogno anche del del lavoro a casa perché
             need to do some work at home because

192          quand[o aumenteranno
             whe[n there will be more

193    P         [quelle medie lì °mammamia°
                 [that middle school °jeez°

194    T1    E vabeh (adesso poi)
             Oh well (and now)

195    P     Abbiamo quinta (che poi), lo preparerete °un
             There is the fifht grade (which I mean), will you help him
             with that

196          po'°?
             A little°?

197    T1    Eh ce[rto
             Well of co[urse

198    T2    [Ecc=
             Su=

199    T1    [Eh!
             [Eh!

200    T2    =ome! È dalla prima che li prepari[amo
             =sure! We've been teaching them since the first gra[de

201    T1                              [Brava Denise
                                       [Well put Denise

202    P     [Hhh
             [Hhh

203    T1    [Hhh
             [Hhh

204    T2    [Hhh
             [Hhh

205    P     Proprio dico per passaggio dell'a-
             No I mean to get to the next gra-

206    T2    No ma sono dei ragazzi in gamba
             Well, they are smart kids

207    T1    Eh si [molto
             Yes [definitely
```

In lines 190 and 191 "it's clear that in the long term he will need to do some work at home", T1 refers to the "curriculum for the home" (Baker & Keogh, 1995). As Baker and Keogh put it, "parents are thus positioned as ancillary teachers, and the work of the school is extended into the work of the home" (1995, p.279), claiming that in order for the child to be successful at school, some works at home needs to be done. The mother does not answer with a commitment, nor with an explanation (like elsewhere reported: Howard & Lipinoga, 2010; Koothoff, 2015). In turn, she switches the topic to the immi-

nent end of the elementary school and the beginning of middle school "that middle school, jeez" (line 193). When T1 tries to minimize the matter "Oh well, and now" (line 194), P goes on asking the teachers whether they will prepare the child for this passage ("will you help him with that?" Lines 195-196). While the literature attributes this linguistic competence to native parents (Weininger and Lareau, 2003), in this instance – although non-native- the mother shows to be able to effectively manage the conversation as a native parent. Interestingly, T2 exclaims "Sure! We've been teaching them from the first grade!" (line 200), reiterating a position that, although being obvious for the teachers, can serve the purpose of managing whatever ambiguity the mom's question arose.

T1, then, agrees with T2 by positively assessing her words "Well put Denise", but after a common laugh (lines 202-204). Laughing together indicates an alignment between the interacting parts, but also a way to overcome the communicative embarrassment (Alasuutari, 2009). The mother, though, goes back to her point "No I mean to get to the next gra(de)" (line 205), through a reformulation of her previous statement, asking for the teachers to reply. It is T2 to address the matter, saying "well, they are smart kids", using "well" as a discourse marker (Orletti, 2000) to minimize mother's apprehension without, again, clearly answering the question. This way, T2 reassures the mother by means of a generalization extending the assessment to the whole classroom, confirmed by T1 in her next move ("Yes, definitely" line 207).

Excerpts 5 and 6 show something contrasting with previous literature as in Lareau and Weininger (2003). While in their study on PTCs the authors highlight that it is native parents who question teachers' authority, our data suggest that even non-native parents can use similar communication strategies. What is worth noting is how the teachers do not cede their epistemic territory to the mother. As non-native parents make moves that could somehow "seize" their authority and epistemic management, teachers defend their asymmetric position by marking their territory without legitimizing parents' "invasions" (i.e. ex-5: line 152; ex-6: lines 200, 206).

In the fifth excerpt, the mother makes a strong statement, when she asks T1 if she really gives homework to do ("do you?" ex. 5 Line 155). By asking this question the mother is challenging the teacher's authority and professionalism, marking that it is expected for teachers to give students homework to do. Not only is she invading her epistemic authority, but also implicitly framing herself as a competent arbiter of teachers' work. T1, in turn, resists and declines this invasion by firmly stating "Yes I do!" (ex 5, line 156), stressing for the second time that she does in fact give homework, after previously indicating that it should be the mother's responsibility to know about it anyway ("That's something you have to tell me!", ex. 5 line 152).

In the sixth excerpt, we can observe an analogous conversational structure, with the mother asking how the teachers are planning to prepare the students for middle school implicitly questioning their work. The teachers, on the other hand, account for their work "we've been teaching them since the first grade" (ex. 6 line 200), and then change the subject focusing on children themselves "well, they are smart kids" (ex. 6 line 206) making a generalization and de-problematizing the mother's worries.

5. Discussion

Taking together the reported excerpts, our findings partially confirm and partially disconfirm the previous literature on the role played by non-native parents during PTCs, which mostly reported on their passive attitude towards the received assessments (Garcia-Sanchez & Orellana, 2007; Howard & Lipinoga, 2010).

Analyzing these PTCs through the theoretical and methodological lens of Conversation Analysis allowed us to meticulously look at and thoroughly reflect on the extent to which parents are allowed to participate in and negotiate the interaction with teachers during these institutional encounters.

In their study on PTCs, Hovart and colleagues (2003) advance that parents with higher linguistic skills perform the role of their children's advocates. Not only by doing so are they in a position to try and foster their educational achievements, but also to create an interactional context where they can ask teachers for a customized care for their children. In light of this, it is important to reflect on the amount of interactional space left for native and non-native parents, and how managing this space can, to different degrees, impact children's academic career.

As non-native parents have a different linguistic and cultural background compared to the scholastic institution, and because they are not always fluent in Italian (Bove & Mantovani, 2010), having a conversation on the consolidated practice of PTCs can open a window of opportunity for intercultural interventions to be realized and work on some implicit practices that can hinder a thorough integration.

If we recognize that with a different degree of parents' participation comes a different degree of teachers' expectations and engagement, which in turn can impact students' academic career, then every action comes with a broader meaning to take into account in order to avoid that through unintentional and taken-for-granted gestures social inequalities are not fought, but reproduced (McCarthy, 1990).

This calls for the importance of reflecting with teachers on the way their professional identity is shaped and performed during PTCs, in order to try and close the gap between native and non-native parents with respect to their participatory power during institutional interactions. It is teachers who can, in this sense, operate as active agents of change to fight and reduce inequalities. Because even when both parties can rely on the same repertoire of communication skills, PTCs for their very nature tend to be asymmetrical with teachers holding more power. This is all more true with non-native parents who, unlike teachers and native parents, have probably not been socialized to the goals, expectations and evaluations of *that* school within *that* culture. Additionally, teachers are more knowledgeable in terms of practices and meanings orienting the conversation during PTCs, playing a role in the production and definition of the discourse and the texts that will be presented during the interaction even before this takes place. We advance that this peculiarity recalls the "hidden agenda" documented in doctor-patient encounters (Frankel, 1984) where on the one hand is the doctor who controls the interaction by asking questions and only apparently shifting from one topic to another, while on the other is the patient, who is unaware of the rationale behind the sequence of questions. This occurs because it is the doctor the only one who knows about the hidden agenda of such an encounter, namely its organization, structure, and the necessary elements to reach the goal of the exchange (Orletti, 2000).

Such an implicit routine, orienting the sequence of themes that will be addressed and the schema used to evaluate the type of argumentations authorized by the institution, represents a form of institutional power and, as Blommaert (2005) put it, is part of a professional habitus.

Even written words and documents used as a tangible proof to back one's claims during PTCs (such as tests, records, etc.) to foster an "objective" and "unbiased" discussion are, in fact, culturally oriented –reflecting the institutional culture- and, once again, facilitating teachers more than parents. Teachers rely on institutional documents as a means to organize the interactions and support them. These documents, in fact, offer a set of topics to discuss (e.g. new skills achieved), a tangible representation of how the child's achievements can be classified within standardized scales and compared to other students' (e.g. report cards), and overall proofs and documentations attesting the child's performance, which is institutionally assessed.

Being a non-native parent who tries to navigate institutional interactions can lead to a lower awareness of the implicit knowledge conveyed during PTCs which somehow can impact the possibility for non-native parents to democratically interact with teachers (Davitti, 2003; Hovart, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). On the other hand, sharing the same cultural and linguistic background can foster communication and make it more flowing and less ambiguous, which anyway does not guarantee an efficient and effective interaction.

Reflecting on PTCs with non-native parents asks us to re-think our cultural models and the way they are taken for granted (Holland and Quinn, 1987). It is through misunderstandings, faux pas, and mistakes that these models become evident, helping us to sharpen our wits when re-thinking practices that are deemed as natural and spontaneous. These practices, in turn, lay on our broader cultural background and the set of personal, implicit, and professional values that come with them and, as our data support, are put into play even with non-native parents.

Thinking about these elements can actually benefits every single participant during a PTC. Parents in this study employed not only typical and, to some degrees, expected communication strategies, but also unexpected, asking us to more broadly keep in mind the contextual and situational complexity of these interactions during our analysis.

Even the very same term "native" needs to be problematized: being a native does not only concern being a member of a geographic and physical area, but sharing a pattern of cultural and experiential knowledge. In this specific institutional context, we advance that further research can benefit from looking at native/non-native parents in terms of their knowledge and mastery of the school culture (Fabbri, 2012). That is how legitimated they feel to express themselves and perform their roles actively in a potentially alien or familiar context, overlooking our "labels" that too often we tend to attribute without thinking twice.

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