

Children's peer conflict in culturally and linguistically heterogeneous schools: a pedagogical perspective on its risks and opportunities

Nicola Nasi*

Abstract

The paper explores children's peer conflict in classrooms characterized by cultural and linguistic heterogeneity. Drawing from larger video-ethnographic research in two primary schools in northern Italy, this study adopts a CA-informed approach to analyze occurrences of natural conflict between children with a migratory background. As the analysis illustrates, by arguing with each other children refine the social and linguistic skills in their interactional repertoire and negotiate their respective identities and roles in the peer group. Thus, in the discussion I argue that peer conflict entails significant opportunities for migrant children's social inclusion in the community, but it is also a locus where children might exclude other classmates. On the basis of these insights, the article outlines the pedagogical relevance of peer conflict and proposes few implications for teachers' professional practice.

Keywords: social inclusion and exclusion; peer group; classroom interaction; Conversation Analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION¹

In the last decades, growing immigrant influxes have posed significant challenges to European educational institutions. 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 provide for children's social inclusion in the community (see MIUR, 2014). Notably, schools often face these challenges with limited resources, a condition which is acutely felt by teachers and impact on children's educational opportunities (Eurydice, 2019).

In this context, the peer group represents a resource that can crucially impact on migrant children's 'apprenticeship period' in the new community.

* Università di Bologna (Italia).

1 I would like to thank Professor Letizia Caronia for her precious insights on a previous draft of this article.

As the analysis will illustrate, the peer group entails both opportunities for children's inclusion and risks that can lead to their social exclusion from the group. Despite its central role, the emphasis on teacher-led socialization has brought scholars to neglect the role of the peer group in classroom everyday life (Thornborrow, 2003; Maybin, 2006). There is a relative paucity of studies that highlighted children's 'naturally-occurring' peer practices in the classroom. In this regard, the present article casts light on an understudied phenomenon, providing pedagogically-significant knowledge that might help teachers calibrate and refine their everyday professional practice (e.g., by providing keys to interpret specific events in the peer group).

Specifically, this study explores children's peer practices in two Italian primary schools, focusing on instances of *peer conflict* in the ordinary and L2 classroom. Conflict has been studied by several authors who considered its sequential organization and the semiotic resources used by participants to manage and sustain it (see Moore & Burdelski, 2020 for an overview; see also Pontecorvo *et al.*, 1991; Pontecorvo, 1993a). The article is inscribed in this broad research milieu and presents two emblematic sequences: the first highlights a conflictual event that unfolds beyond the teacher's gaze, whereas the second illustrates children's strategies to deal with conflict in front of the teacher. These 'natural' peer conflicts involve children with a migratory background: some of these children were born in Italy, whereas others have recently started to attend the Italian school (*NAI, neo-arrivati in Italia*).

A first goal of the study is to highlight the role of peer conflict in children's sociolinguistic development and in the joint construction of their local identities and roles in the group. Even though previous literature has illustrated the centrality of conflict in children's life-worlds (see among others Maynard, 1985), there is a lack of empirical data on this kind of event in contemporary schools, which are increasingly characterized by cultural and linguistic heterogeneity. Notably, in these contexts peer conflict is crucial to the local unfolding of practices of inclusion and exclusion among children. In this respect, a second goal of the study is to critically discuss the role of conflict in children's social inclusion or exclusion in the classroom community. These latter reflections are relevant from a pedagogical perspective and constitute the basis for the ensuing implications for teachers' professional practice.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The study is informed by the language socialization paradigm (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017) and focuses on the process through which children, by participating in language-mediated activities, acquire the social and linguistic skills that allow them to act appropriately in a specific community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the classroom, children are introduced to the expectations of the school community and of the broader society of which public schools are an institutional expression. Notably, this process of language-mediated socialization regards both 'native' children and chil-

dren with a migratory background: by participating in everyday activities, children become increasingly apt at using contextually appropriate forms of talk and other semiotic resources. Even those who master the Italian language learn how to use it in ways that are ratified by the 'school culture' and oriented to the goals and the social organization of the institution.

The teacher has a central role in this gradual process of socialization. Nevertheless, several studies have underlined the role of the peer group in children's development (e.g., Cekaite *et al.*, 2014; see Kyratzis & Goodwin, 2017 for an overview). Children also learn how to act appropriately by interacting with their classmates on a daily basis. In this regard, children need to acquire the linguistic and social competences that are necessary to be included as competent members of the peer group. Notably, several scholars have underlined how a failure to meet the social expectations of the peer group can result in the ascription of an out-group identity (Goodwin, 2006; Evaldsson, 2007). The peer group plays thus a major role in children's *social inclusion* or *exclusion* at school.

2.1. *On social inclusion and exclusion*

Since there are various competing definitions of the concepts of inclusion and exclusion, a clarification is due. In this article, these constructs are approached from an interactional perspective, focusing on the local practices and stances in and through which children are included or excluded from the current activity (Ochs *et al.*, 2001; Weiste *et al.*, 2020). From this perspective, social inclusion and exclusion are understood as locally accomplished phenomena, mainly bound to (a) the local opportunities for participation and (b) the negotiation of participants' social roles and hierarchies. As regards the opportunities for participation, inclusion and exclusion are brought to bear in relation to the local participation framework: children might grant access to the activity at hand *or* they might deny the possibility to participate as a ratified participant (Goodwin, 2002). As regards the negotiation of social roles and hierarchies, children steadily re-construct their social relationships and roles in the peer group: positions of power and subordination, together with local identities and positive or negative attributes, are negotiated and disputed in and through various practices. For example, local asymmetries between children might be constructed through negative category ascription (e.g., being a 'bad friend', Evaldsson, 2007) or through the use of directives (e.g., "Admit it!"; Goodwin, 2006: 223). Therefore, social exclusion is not only related to the limited possibility to participate in the activity at hand, as it can also regard the social role and identity that is ascribed to somebody. A child might participate in peers' activities in an enduring peripheral position,² or in subordinate roles that are negatively assessed by others. In this

2 Arguably, the concepts of social inclusion and exclusion need to be tackled with a not-too-contingent approach: we might talk about inclusion (or exclusion) if a child's access (or non-access) to peer activities becomes an *enduring* quality of their relation-

regard, apparently inclusive practices can also entail exclusion, in the sense that participation is granted, but only in a subordinate position. Notably, children's local practices of inclusion or exclusion are often bound to conflictual events in the peer group.

2.2. *Children's peer conflict*

Conflict can be broadly defined as an activity “composed of at least two sequential actions or oppositional stances by two or more parties” (Moore & Burdelski, 2020; see also the general terms “adversative discourse”, Church, 2009) and seems to be a central activity in children's life-worlds. From children's perspective, it is an activity that has value in itself: conflict might simply arise for conflict's sake, as children might argue for their own amusement (see the appraisal of the Italian discussion in Corsaro & Rizzo, 1988; see also conflict as a “cultural routine” in Brenneis & Lein, 1977).

In this sense, the goal of children's conflict is not necessarily the resolution of the dispute (Maynard, 1985; Church, 2009): children might argue with each other to assert their power and to manage social relations, negotiating their local identities and hierarchies within the peer group (Corsaro & Maynard, 1996; Cobb-Moore *et al.*, 2008; LeMaster, 2010). In and through conflict, children construct and shape their local organization by continuously testing and realigning the current arrangement of social positions among peers (Goodwin, 1990; Danby & Baker, 1998). Moreover, conflict is relevant from a pedagogical perspective, as it is central to children's development and socialization into the array of expected ways of behaving in the community (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004; Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 2004; Baraldi, 2007). Although adults often evaluate children's conflict in negative ways (i.e. as something to simply stop or sanction; Danby & Theobald, 2012), by participating in everyday arguments and disputes children (a) learn to master cognitive and linguistic tools of arguing and thinking, co-constructing knowledge through “distributed reasoning” (Pontecorvo *et al.*, 1991; Pontecorvo, 1993b; Pontecorvo & Girardet, 1993) and (b) develop linguistic and social skills that allow them to participate in culturally appropriate ways in argumentative events (e.g. they learn specific strategies of perspective taking or the importance of providing justifications for one's stance; see Goodwin, 1983; Pontecorvo *et al.*, 1991; Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 2004; Cobb-Moore *et al.*, 2008). In this regard, conflict is a “double opportunity space”, since it allows both children's co-construction of their social organization and children's sociolinguistic development (Ehrlich & Blum-Kulka, 2010). The present article expands the empirical basis of this research milieu by analyzing instances of peer conflict between children with a migratory background in Italian schools.

ship (Kyratzis, 2004). This recognition of inclusion/exclusion as temporally unfolding processes does not mean to underestimate the role that even a single episode of refusal might play in children's development or ability to build meaningful social relationships.

3. METHODOLOGY AND SETTING

3.1. Methodology

Several studies on children's conflict have approached it in a theoretical fashion (Canevaro, 2006) or implemented and analyzed research actions that steered the conflictual situation in a specific direction (see the “dialogical” management of conflict in Iervese, 2006; see also Nigris, 2002; Novara & Di Chio, 2013). Other authors considered instances of ‘natural’ conflict, using grids to categorize participants’ various moves and strategies (Bertolini, 2006). Although relevant to our broad understanding of the meaning of conflict, these studies have failed to account for the concrete unfolding of conflictual events; specifically, they missed how relevant dimensions of conflictual events are indexed and constructed in and through social interaction. Conversely, other authors have focused on the semiotic resources and the sequential structures of ‘natural’ conflicts among children (Moore & Burdelski, 2020; see above). The present study adopts this situated perspective and considers thus the local unfolding of peer conflicts through an ethnographic approach combined with the micro-analytical instruments of Conversation Analysis (Cekaite, 2013). As shown by several authors, a sequential analysis of concrete conflictual events can provide a detailed understanding of how children manage to construct and negotiate relevant aspects of their local life-worlds in and through language and other semiotic systems (Evaldsson, 2007). In turn, this knowledge is relevant to increase teachers’ awareness of the concrete unfolding of children’s conflict (see below).

Data were collected during nine months of ethnographic fieldwork. In the field, 30 hours of peer interactions were video-recorded, transcribed (see Jefferson 2004) and analyzed with both the local research team and international colleagues. All occurrences of peer conflict were selected and analyzed. For the purposes of this article, I consider as ‘conflict’ every sequence of oppositional stances or actions that unfolds *over more than two turns*. This analytical focus on *extended* sequences of conflict is due to the difficulty of clearly defining peer conflicts composed of just two sequential actions. Moreover, extended conflicts provided children with ample opportunities to develop and refine their sociolinguistic skills and to negotiate their social organization.

3.2. Setting

The study involved two primary schools in Northern Italy. The schools are placed in a low socioeconomic area and are attended by a large number of children with a migratory background. Several Italian L2 classes were organized in order to deal with children who still had a limited competence in Italian. The analysis takes into consideration instances of peer conflict among children aged 8 to 10, in the ordinary as well as the L2 classroom.

In the corpus, there are 71 occurrences of extended peer conflict which vary consistently in terms of their sequential unfolding. In some cases, chil-

dren managed conflict situations on their own, at times along a non-linear trajectory. In other cases, children tried to resolve conflict on their own and, upon failing to do so, they sought teacher's intervention to settle the dispute. Nevertheless, in both cases the 'source' of conflict was an action that was interpreted as an infringement of the local expectations of the group, thus making relevant these "remedial interchanges" (Goffman, 1971). All occurrences involved thus a clear moral component, as one party usually held the other as morally accountable for the alleged breach (see Bergmann, 1998; Caronia *et al.*, 2021 on morality).

As regards institutional ideologies, peer conflict was usually stopped by teachers as soon as they got notice of it. Broadly considered, teachers promoted ideologies of 'harmony' and togetherness, and reasons for conflict were often labeled as trivial (e.g., "Why are you arguing? Even about this!").

4. ANALYSIS

Out of 71 sequences of conflict, I chose 2 that are representative of children's two different ways to manage conflictual situation. First, children dealt with conflict on their own, i.e. without involving the teacher or ostensibly orienting to the institutional frame of the classroom (section 4.1.). Second, children invoked the teacher as the authority in charge of settling the dispute between peers (section 4.2.).

The analysis highlights how children test different discursive practices in relation to their effectiveness in attaining their own purposes, thereby acquiring and refining sociolinguistic tools to competently participate in conflictual events. Moreover, in and through these practices children co-construct their social organization and negotiate valued or problematic identities.

4.1. *Children's 'non-mediated' peer conflict*

The first excerpt is an example of children's conflict that is not mediated by the teacher. It illustrates how children with a migratory background manage to reformulate lexical items in order to construct and negotiate their membership to specific categories (i.e. being a good/bad friend; see Evalds-son, 2007) and the ascription of blame for an untoward event. The exchange was recorded in the ordinary classroom. The break is over and the lesson is about to start; nevertheless, the teacher is not yet in the classroom and children are still moving around and mingling. A group of girls have been playing for some time with cards. Few seconds before the sequence in Ex. 1 one of the girls, Sawaira, went outside of the classroom, alone.³

3 All children are 3rd graders and started attending the Italian school at age 6. Sofia and Dario have the Italian citizenship. Elke's parents were born in Morocco, Sawaira's parents in Bangladesh, and Lin's parents in Romania.

Excerpt 1

- 1 Sofia ma sawaira si è arrabbiata perchè le abbiamo
fatto le cose agli occhi?
did sawaira get angry because of what we did to her eyes?
- 2 Elke [ah boh!
[who knows!
- 3 Lin [secondo me si è arrabbiata [perchè-
>i think she got angry [because-<
- 4 Sara [no perchè le abbiamo fatto male.
[no because we hurt her.
- 5 Lin secondo me si è arrabbiata perchè elke 1:
l'ha- l'ha rincorsa [e l'ha colpita
**i think she got angry because elke c:
ch- chased her and [hit her**
- 6 Elke [RINCORSA?! ho fatto due passi! ^rincorsa
[CHASED?! i took two steps! ^chased
^((laughing voice))
- 7 Lin si! e forse secondo me lei si è arrabbiata perchè
yes! and maybe i think she got angry because
- 8 tu l'hai rincorsa. (.) l'hai rincorsa, e e
you chased her. (.) you chased her, and and
- 9 Lin gli hai fatto male. quando [gli hai preso-
you hurt her. when you took-
- 10 gli hai strappato la cosa dalle mani.
you snatched that thing out of her hand
- 11 Elke [gli ho f- no
[i hu- no
- 12 Elke no:, non [gli ho m-
no:, i [didn't-
- 13 Dario [a chi?
[to whom?
- 14 Elke oh ma tu stai zitto stiam parlando tra di noi.
oh shut up you we're talking among ourselves.
- 15 cosa c'entri
it's not your business
- 16 Elke ((goes to Lin))
- 17 Elke non gliel'ho strappata di mano e non gli ho fatto male.
i didn't snatch it out of her hand and i didn't hurt her.
- 18 Lin >si gli hai fatto [male perchè stava tenendo ^ ()<
>yes you hurt [her because she was holding ^ ()<
- 19 ^((mimes holding something))
- 20 Elke [no ma-
[no but-
- 21 Elke ^ho capito ma non gli ho fatto male io
^i got it but i didn't hurt her
^((grabs Lin's arm and mimes hitting her))
- 22 magari si è tagliata con la carta prima
maybe she cut herself with the paper before
((shrougths))
- 24 (2.0)
- 25 Elke ((turns around and starts going away))
- 26 Lin >^sei stata tu a ()<
>^it was you that ()<
- 27 ^((hits Elke))
- 28 ((Lin and Elke hit each other))

At the beginning of the sequence, the other girls of the group are trying to piece together the reasons behind Sawaira's flight. Sofia starts the discussion by asking why Sawaira "got angry" (line 1). The question is answered differently by Lin and Sara: whereas Sara ascribes blame to the whole group (*because we hurt her*, line 4), Lin identifies the responsible individually and describes the prior untoward event in a specific way (*i think she got angry because elke chased her and hit her*, lines 3 and 5). Despite a first element of uncertainty (*i think*), the turn is a clear accusation to Elke, who is thereby constructed as a 'bad friend'; this negative ascription is bound to a shared ethical rule, i.e. 'don't hit your friends'.

Elke immediately resists Lin's ascription of blame: in overlap with her turn, she reformulates Lin's lexical choice, thereby questioning her description of the event: Lin's use of "chase" is constructed as preposterous (see the increased volume and the laughing voice at the end) and reformulated: Elke merely took "two steps" (*chased?! i took two steps! chased*, line 6). Lin promptly counters Elke's argument: even though she adds a further element indexing uncertainty (*maybe*, line 7), she keeps on blaming her classmate for the misdeed. Lin repeats twice her previously chosen word (*chased*, line 8) and adds another detail to the picture: Elke snatched something out of Sawaira's hand. Notably, this move to construct Elke as culpable is again carried out by a reformulation, which is in this case 'self-accomplished': Lin first says that Elke "took" the object, then interrupts the utterance and aggravates her classmate's deed by saying that she "snatched" the object (*you hurt her. when you took- you snatched that thing out of her hand*, lines 9 and 10). In and through their words, the opponents are constructing two versions of the same event that fit their local aims: Lin constructs it in a way that highlights Elke's agency, puts blame on her and exerts moral pressure.⁴ Conversely, Elke resists this ascription to the category of 'bad friends' by negotiating the meaning and gravity of the offense (Goffman, 1971).

The sequence proceeds along a similar vein. Dario's attempt to join the conversation is baldly rejected by Elke (*shut up you we're talking among ourselves. it's not your business*, lines 14 and 15). Once secured the dyadic structure of interaction, Elke further denies Lin's accusations (lines 17-22). In line 23, she also offers an alternative explanation for Sawaira's anger (*maybe she cut herself with the paper before*, line 23; see Ehrlich & Blum-Kulka, 2010: 222). This argument apparently sets the dispute: Lin does not reply and Elke turns around and starts moving away. Nevertheless, the emotional tension of the dispute needs to be released: in a sort of final *catharsis*, Lin physically attacks Elke, who hits back (lines 27 and 28). This initial round of hits rapidly evolves in a more playful rough and tumble. Eventually, the teacher's entrance in the classroom stops the confrontation: both children go back to their desks.

4 With her moves, Lin is also constructing her identity as a 'good friend': Sawaira suffered an injustice and Lin defends her in front of the group.

In this sequence, children manage and sustain conflict without the intervention of the teacher, negotiating their respective roles and identities in the peer group. This negotiation revolves around different descriptions of the same social event (Cekaite, 2012), which are relevant to children's negotiation of their membership to the group. Specifically, children negotiate their local identity in relation to a morally-laden category (i.e. 'being a bad friend'; see Evaldsson, 2007). One of the practices through which this local negotiation is interactionally accomplished is by reformulating previously uttered words: children's ingeniously use verbal resources in their repertoire to sustain their position and pursue their local aims.

4.2. Teacher-mediated peer conflict

Ex. 2 was recorded in the Italian L2 class and illustrates children's strategies to manage peer conflict that involves the teacher. Specifically, this instance of conflict resembles a court event with an accusing party, a defense, and an institutional authority responsible to re-establish moral and social justice. A child accuses a classmate in front of the teacher, who tries to establish what happened in order to deliver her 'verdict'. The overall structure of the sequence is thus similar to other teacher-mediated conflicts described in previous literature: there is a first accusatory report to the teacher, the teacher's interrogation, and a final resolution (see Cekaite, 2012). At the center of the analytical focus are Ying's⁵ defensive strategies: the girl ingeniously adapts her argumentative line of defense according to the local contingencies of the conflict. In particular, she constructs a logical argument and provides material evidence in order to avoid blame.

Excerpt 2

- | | | |
|---|---------|---|
| 1 | Munir | maestra? teacher? |
| 2 | Teacher | dimmi tell me |
| 3 | Munir | ying colorato mio astuccio. ying drew my pencil case. |
| 4 | Teacher | chi? who? ((looks toward the children)) |
| 5 | Munir | ying, |
| 6 | Teacher | yi:ng= ((looks at Ying)) |
| 7 | Ying | =non ho colorato adesso =i didn't draw now |

5 All children are 'newly arrived' (*neo-arrivati in Italia* in the institutional jargon) and have been attending the Italian school for less than a year and a half. Ying comes from China, Ramil comes from the Philippines, whereas Munir comes from Pakistan).

- 8 Munir *adesso no!*
now no! ((goes back to his desk))
- 9 Ying *ma non ho colorato.*
but i didn't draw
- 10 Teacher *ma no! ma glielo hai scarabocchiato, ying,*
no! but you scribbled it, ying,
- 11 *non si fa questo,*
you don't do that,
((6 lines omitted))
- 18 Ying *non sono: fatto io:,*
i am no:t done i:t,
- 19 *guarda questa penna blu*
look this blue pen ((points to Munir's pencil case)) [Fig. 28]
- 20 *^io- io usat- la mi=-*
^i- i use- my=-
^((shows her pen))
- 21 *=questa penna è nera,*
=this pen is black, ((points to her notebook))
- 22 Munir *ah tu.*
ah you.
- 23 Teacher *sei sicura?=
are you sure?=
=sei sicuro che l'abbia fatto ying?
=are you sure that ying did it?*
- 24 *sì, ying così*
yes, ying like this ((points to Ying))
- 25 Teacher *sei sicuro?*
are you sure?
- 26 Munir *((nods))*
- 27 Ying *ma- dev- ho ^usato questa penna*
but- i mus- ^i used this pen
^((shows the pen to the teacher)) [Fig. 29]
- 28 *^ma questa penna è nera*
^but this pen is black
^((raises her notebook toward the teacher)) [Fig. 30]
- 29 *come fa diventare blu*
how can it become blue
((14 lines omitted))
- 45 Ramil *e lei fatto così ((points to the scribble on the pencilcase))*
she did this
- 46 Teacher *è stata lei [allora ((points to Ying))*
she was it [then
- 47 Ramil *[sì*
[yes
- 48 Ying *[no: non ho fatto*
[no: i didn't do
- 49 Ramil *io ho visto*
I saw
- 50 Teacher *yi:ng non si fanno queste cose,=
yi:ng you don't do this,=*
- 51 Ying *=non ho fat- non ho detto bugie*

52 **=i did no- i didn't lie**
 ed è vero non ho fatto quello,
 53 Teacher **and it's true i didn't do that,**
 sicuro?
 sure?
 54 (0.2)
 55 Teacher come facciamo ying?
 what do we do ying?
 56 adesso dobbiamo pre- chiamare un giudice qua.
 now we must pre- call a judge here.
 57 eh io non ti ho vista, non posso dire se sei stat
 tu o meno,
 eh i didn't see you, i can't say if you did it o
 not,
 58 come facciamo, (0.5) allora (.) andiamo a noi
 what do we do, (0.5) so (.) let's go back to us
 59 dopo ne parliamo:,
 later we talk about i:t,
 60 dopo lo diciamo alla maestra laura e vediamo,
 later we tell the teacher laura and we see,
 61 *((they resume the previous activity))*



Fig. 28: Ying shows the blue scribbles on Munir's pencil case



Fig. 29: Ying shows her black pen



Fig. 30: Ying shows the black writing on her notebook

Munir stands next to the teacher and publicly accuses Ying of having drawn his pencil case (line 3). The teacher immediately constructs the misdeed as serious: she emphatically asks who did it (*who?*, line 4) while deploying a sort of morally-laden “lighthouse gaze” toward the children (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2018). As soon as Munir re-states the culprit, her inquisitory look stops on Ying. The teacher’s gaze together with the marked repetition of Ying’s name (line 52) puts moral pressure on the girl, constructing her as morally at fault. Ying promptly denies, adding a temporal element to her previous denials (*i didn’t draw now*, line 7). This temporal element (*now*) is picked up by Munir, who uses it to undermine Ying’s position by highlighting its weak points (*now no!*, line 8; see Ehrlich & Blum-Kulka, 2010: 226). Ying’s further denial (line 9) is also unsuccessful, as the teacher reformulates the event (*draw > scribble*, line 10), constructing it as untoward and ascribing Ying the moral responsibility for it (*no! but you scribbled it, ying*, lines 10). This negative evaluation is followed by an impersonal rule formulation (*you don’t do that*, line 11).

Confronted with this negative evaluation, Ying changes her line of defense. She uses several material artefacts (her pen, her notebook, and Munir’s pencil case) to construct a logical argument that proves her innocence: the drawings on Munir’s pencil case have been done with a blue pen (*look this blue pen*, line 19), but Ying’s pen is black – as she publicly displays by showing her notebook (*i use my- this pen is black*, lines 20 and 21). Ying’s argument is convincing: the teacher seems to reconsider her previous judgement and questions the trustworthiness of Munir’s report by repeatedly asking him to confirm his accusation (*are you sure that ying did it?*, lines 23, 24, and 26; see Cekaite, 2012). Munir confirms and Ying repeats her argument, displaying again her pieces of evidence (i.e. her pen, line 28, and her notebook, line 29). This emphatic display culminates in Ying’s final move, a rhetorical question to the audience (*how can it become blue*, line 30). Through material, bodily, and verbal resources, Ying constructs a well-formed, logical and engaging argument to prove her innocence in front of the authority.

At this point, Ramil joins the dispute and accuses Ying, thereby backing Munir’s version of the event (*she did this*, line 45). With this move, Ramil constructs a formation of two-against-one that marginalizes Ying as a morally-reproachable transgressor. Notably, Ramil’s accusation is underpinned by a reference to his direct witness of the misdeed (*I saw*, line 49). Ramil’s intervention seems again to convince the teacher of Ying’s culpability (*ying you don’t do this*, line 50). At this point, Ying changes for the second time her argumentative strategy by making a meta-comment on the whole situation: instead of referring directly to the issue, she formulates her previous contributions in relation to their truth value, thereby displaying her being a good child (*i didn’t lie, it’s true i didn’t do that*, line 51 and 52). With this move, Ying constructs herself as a morally accountable subject, putting the value of her ‘word’ (or her *face*, Goffman, 1967) at stake. The teacher is in a difficult position. If she keeps on blaming Ying, she constructs her

as a liar and disregards her repeated claims of innocence. Conversely, disregarding Munir's accusation possibly means to ratify a social injustice. Facing these two equally problematic alternatives, the teacher chooses to postpone the judgement. First, she claims the impossibility of establishing what happened without having witnessed it (*i didn't see you, i can't say if you did it or not*, line 57). Second, she puts another authority, i.e. the teacher from Ying's and Munir's ordinary classroom, in charge of settling the dispute (*later we talk about it, later we tell the teacher Laura and we see*, lines 59 and 60).

In this sequence, Munir and Ramil repeatedly accuse Ying of a misdeed, developing various argumentative strategies to persuade the teacher of the truth of their version (e.g., their direct witness of the untoward action). In order to defend herself from these morally-laden accusations, Ying adapts her line of defense to the contingencies of the sequence, mobilizing various arguments to avoid blame: she constructs a logical argument based on material evidence, and puts the value of her 'word' at stake in order to convince the teacher that she is telling the truth. If the effectiveness of an argument depends on its results (Ehrlich & Blum-Kulka, 2010), Ying manages to change the teacher's initial ascription of blame, persuading her to postpone the judgement and to give her the benefit of the doubt.

The two extracts shown above are representative of different forms of conflict between children. Which partial conclusions can be drawn from their analysis?

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis illustrated two emblematic instances of children's conflict, both in the L2 and in the ordinary classroom. The first extract showed how children sustain and bring to an end a conflictual situation on their own (section 4.1.), whereas the second extract highlighted their strategies to manage conflict in front of the teacher (section 4.2.).

The analysis confirmed previous insights on peer conflict as a "double opportunity space", allowing both children's sociolinguistic development and children's co-construction of their social organization (Ehrlich & Blum-Kulka, 2010).

As regards children's development, the analysis illustrated that peer conflict has a clear pedagogical relevance, as it can foster children's acquisition of social and linguistic skills. First, children learn to master tools of arguing and thinking that potentially foster their socio-cognitive development. For example, these tools regard their ability to construct logical connections (Ex. 2) or to find causal relationships that provide alternative, plausible explanations for an event (Ex. 1). Children become thus increasingly 'equipped' with the means to argue within the school environment (and possibly in other contexts). Second, children can acquire social and linguistic skills that allow them to competently participate in these culturally

shaped activities: by participating in conflicts, they can develop and refine strategies to carry out and resolve conflict, as well as competences to avoid it. In this respect, children gradually approximate adult conventions regarding appropriate ways to deal with views and opinions that differ from their own. The analysis illustrated several ways in which children's practices echo discursive conventions from the adult culture: for example, (a) children recognize the need to *provide (material) evidence* to prove a point, (b) they are aware of the *importance of lexical choice* in describing a certain event, and (c) they understand the *role of logic* in the construction of a powerful argument. By arguing with their classmates and with the teachers, children are thus socialized (and socialize each other) into peer-specific and broader societal values regarding appropriate ways of participating in argumentative events. Third, in and through conflict children introduce each other to the expectations of the community (be it the 'restricted' community of the peer group or the community of the classroom). For instance, the analysis underlined how children might argue about expected ways of behaving at school, holding each other morally accountable for departures from the norm (e.g., don't hit your classmates, or scribble on their pencil case). Fourth, children's participation in conflict might be relevant for their acquisition of the second language. The analysis highlighted how children in the Italian L2 class are able to deploy the limited competences in their interactional repertoire to sustain prolonged argumentative events. By arguing with each other on an everyday basis, non-native children can learn to use a wide range of communicative resources in the L2 (e.g. directives to secure an audience – "look" – and rhetorical questions, see Ex. 2).

As regards children's social organization, in and through conflictual situations children test and realign their social relationships, thereby constructing and negotiating their respective roles and identities in the peer group. In the extracts presented, these negotiations mainly revolved around morality. Children displayed their being 'good pupils' with peers and teachers, while holding others as morally at fault in relation to local conceptions of right and wrong. This is particularly evident in the case of an alliance of two children against a classmate who is perceived as having transgressed the normative expectations of the community (Ex. 2). Moreover, conflict is an arena for children's negotiation of friendship relationships. For instance, children might ascribe and resist membership to categories such as 'good/bad friend', or they might strengthen the boundaries of a group by preventing other children to participate in the conflict at hand (Ex. 1). Peer conflict is therefore relevant for the local negotiation of the linguistic, social, and moral order of the peer group. Through conflict children ratify and re-negotiate what can and cannot be done and said in the classroom, thereby also jointly constructing their respective roles and hierarchies among peers.

Children's negotiation of the social hierarchy of the peer group is relevant in light of the dichotomy between social inclusion and exclusion. On the one hand, the analysis illustrated how children might marginalize other classmates by constructing a formation of two-against-one and/or by ascribing them to a socially despised category (i.e., a 'bad friend', Ex. 1, or a 'bad

pupil', Ex. 2). In this regard, the excerpts show instances of children being, at least situationally, excluded from the 'good', competent members of the community. On the other hand, the analysis showed that peer conflict entails ample opportunities for children's social inclusion. For instance, by participating in argumentative events children can gain culturally-shaped communicative skills that allow them to competently act in the classroom context (and possibly in other contexts). In this respect, children's conflict might favor non-native children apprenticeship period in the new community, as it provides opportunities to test the effectiveness of the linguistic and social resources in their L2 interactional repertoire (see Ex. 2).

5.1. Implications for teachers' professional practice

The insights presented in this article might be relevant for teachers' professional practice, as they provide information on the concrete unfolding of conflictual events among children. This knowledge could raise teachers' awareness regarding the opportunities and risks that peer conflict entails, helping them make more informed choices in the classroom.

Broadly, the analysis illustrated that peer conflict can entail opportunities for children's cognitive and sociolinguistic development, but it might also be problematic in regard to children's construction of their classmates as morally at fault, or as members of socially despised categories. This recognition points to a central dilemma in teachers' everyday practice: when is it appropriate (or necessary) to directly intervene in peer conflict, and when is it wise to let children deal autonomously with their different views?

Previous literature and my ethnographic experience in the field suggest that teachers tend to stop peer conflict as soon as they get notice of it (Danby & Theobald, 2012). Considering its potential opportunities for sociolinguistic development, this posture runs the risk of depriving children of meaningful pedagogic opportunities. In this respect, the analysis suggests a certain professional 'caution' with regard to direct intervention in conflict, which should not be seen as something that simply disrupts classroom 'harmony' (whatever that is). Knowing that conflict can be rich and useful, teachers might first see if children manage to resolve it on their own, and just intervene in case of escalating situations, violent behavior, or peer relationships of subordination that seem crystallized over time. Nevertheless, the analysis also showed how peer conflict can be problematic in several regards. In and through conflict, children might exclude other classmates on the basis of their failures to meet the social expectations of the peer group. In this regard, it is possible that teachers' 'practical' knowledge suggests them to stop peer conflict in order to avoid these potential problems (in this way 'sacrificing' the potential benefits to prevent greater negative consequences).

Overall, the dilemma of (non-)intervention in peer conflict can be brought back to one of the paradoxes of teachers' professional practice (Fabbri, 1996). Confronted with children who argue with each other, the

teacher needs to keep in balance two contrasting mandates: to respect and possibly foster children's *autonomy* (and its potentially fruitful bearings) and to provide for an adult and pedagogically oriented *supervision*, which is inherent in teachers' deontological mandate. This paradox cannot be resolved and the teacher will have to find a local, always re-negotiable equilibrium between these equally relevant elements. Notably, the choice to intervene or to let peer conflict follow its course will also be bound to the teacher's local interpretation of the contingencies of the situation (who are the disputants, what is their relationship, what is the reason for conflict). In this regard, this study offers insights that could help teachers interpret the specific conflictual events they are confronted with in their everyday practice. Specifically, knowledge of the concrete unfolding of peer conflict could help them find a pedagogically meaningful balance between the two contrasting mandates outlined above

REFERENCES

- Baraldi, C. (2007), "Cultura della prevaricazione e gestione del conflitto", in *Minori e Giustizia*, Vol. 4, pp. 275-290.
- Bergmann, J.R. (1998), "Introduction: Morality in Discourse", in *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, Vol. 31, n. 3-4, pp. 279-294.
- Bertolini, C. (2006), "La gestione del conflitto tra pari nella scuola dell'infanzia", in *Orientamenti Pedagogici*, Vol. 53, n. 4, pp. 669-704.
- Blum-Kulka, S. & Snow, C.E. (2004), "Introduction: The potential of peer talk", in *Discourse Studies*, Vol. 6, pp. 291-306.
- Blum-Kulka, S., Huck-Taglicht, D. & Avni, H. (2004), "The Social and Discursive Spectrum of Peer Talk", in *Discourse Studies*, Vol. 6, n. 3, pp. 307-328.
- Brenneis, D. & Lein, L. (1977), "You fruithead: a sociolinguistic approach to dispute settlement", in S. Ervin-Tripp & C. Mitchell-Kernan, *Child Discourse*, New York: Academic Press, pp. 49-65.
- Canevaro, A. (2006), "Conflitti, riconoscimenti, mediazioni nel pensiero e nell'azione educativa", in V. Iervese, *La gestione dialogica del conflitto. Analisi di una sperimentazione con bambini e preadolescenti*, Imola: La Mandragora, pp. 11-30.
- Caronia, L., Colla, V. & Galatolo, R. (2021), "Making unquestionable worlds: Morality building practices in family dinner dialogues", in L. Caronia, *Language and Social Interaction at Home and School*, Amsterdam: Benjamins, pp. 87-120.
- Cekaite, A. (2012), "Tattling and Dispute Resolution: moral order, emotions and embodiment in the teacher-mediated disputes of young second language learners", in S. Danby & M. Theobald, *Disputes in everyday life: Social and moral orders of children and young people*, Bingley, UK: Emerald, pp. 165-192.
- Ead. (2013), "Socializing emotionally and morally appropriate peer group conduct through classroom discourse", in *Linguistics and Education*, Vol. 24, pp. 511-522.

- Cekaite, A. & Björk-Willén, P. (2018), “Enchantment in storytelling: co-operation and participation in children’s aesthetic experience”, in *Linguistics and Education*, Vol. 48, pp. 52-60.
- Cekaite A., Blum-Kulka S. & Grøver V., Teubal E. (2014), “Children’s peer talk and learning: Uniting discursive, social, and cultural facets of peer interactions: Editor’s introduction”, in A. Cekaite, S. Blum-Kulka, V. Grøver & E. Teubal, *Children’s peer talk: Learning from each other*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3-23.
- Church, A. (2009), *Preference Organization and Peer Disputes. How young children resolve conflict*, Farnham, UK: Ashgate.
- Cobb-Moore, C., Danby, S. & Farrell, A. (2008). “‘I told you so’: justification used in disputes in young children’s interactions in an early childhood classroom”, in *Discourse Studies*, Vol. 10, n. 5, pp. 595-614.
- Corsaro, W. & Rizzo, T. (1988), “Discussion and Friendship: Socialization Processes in the Peer Culture of Italian Nursery School Children”, in *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 53, n. 6, pp. 879-894.
- Corsaro, W. & Maynard, D. (1996), “Format tying in discussion and argumentation among Italian and American children”, in D. Slobin, J. Gerhardt, A. Kyratzis & J. Guo, *Social interaction, social context, and language*, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 157-174.
- Danby, S. & Baker, C., (1998), “‘What’s the problem?’—Restoring social order in the preschool classroom”, in I. Hutchby & J. Moran-Ellis, *Children and Social Competence: Arenas of Action*, London: Falmer Press, pp. 159-185.
- Danby, S. & Theobald, M. (2012), *Disputes in Everyday Life. Social and moral orders of children and young people*, Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Ehrlich, S. & Blum-Kulka, S. (2010), “Peer talk as a ‘double opportunity space’: The case of argumentative discourse”, in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 21, pp. 211-233.
- Eurydice (2019), *Integrazione degli studenti provenienti da contesti migratori nelle scuole d’Europa: politiche e misure nazionali*, <https://eurydice.indire.it/publicazioni/integrazione-degli-studenti-provenienti-da-contesti-migratori-nelle-scuole-deuropa-politiche-e-misure-nazionali/>, access May 19, 2022.
- Evaldsson, A.C. (2007), “Accounting for Friendship: Moral Ordering and Category Membership in Preadolescent Girls’ Relational Talk”, in *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, Vol. 40, pp. 377-404.
- Fabbri, M. (1996), *La competenza pedagogica. Il lavoro educativo fra paradosso e intenzionalità*, Bologna: CLUEB.
- Goffman, E. (1967), *Interaction ritual: Essays in face to face behavior*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Id. (1971), *Relations in Public. Microstudies of the Public Order*, New York: Basic Books.
- Goodwin, M.H. (1983), “Aggravated correction and disagreement in children’s conversations”, in *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 7, pp. 657-677.
- Ead. (1990), *He-said-she-said: Talk as social organization among Black children*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press

- Ead. (2002), "Building power asymmetries in girls' interaction", in *Discourse & Society*, 13, 715–730.
- Ead. (2006), *The Hidden Life of Girls: Games of Stance, Status, and Exclusion*, Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Iervese, V. (a cura di) (2006), *La gestione dialogica del conflitto. Analisi di una sperimentazione con bambini e preadolescenti*, Imola: La Mandragora.
- Jefferson, G. (2004), "Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction", in G. Lerner, *Conversation Analysis. Studies from the first generation*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin, pp. 13-31.
- Kyratzis, A. (2004), "Talk and interaction among children and the co-construction of peer groups and peer culture", in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 33, pp. 625–649.
- Kyratzis, A. & Goodwin, M.H. (2017), "Language Socialization in Children's Peer and Sibling-Kin Group Interactions", in P. Duff & S. May, *Language Socialization*, New York: Springer, pp. 123-138.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991), *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LeMaster, B. (2010), "Authority and preschool disputes: Learning to behave in the classroom", in *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, Vol. 20, n. 1, pp. 166-178.
- Maybin, J. (2006), *Children's voices: Talk, knowledge and identity*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maynard, D. (1985). "On the functions of social conflict among children", in *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 50, pp. 207-223.
- MIUR (2014), *Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione di alunni stranieri*. Roma: Ministero dell'Istruzione, https://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2014/linee_guida_integrazione_alunni_stranieri.pdf, access May 19, 2022.
- Moore, E. & Burdelski, M. (2020), "Peer conflict and language socialization in preschool: Introduction to special issue", in *Linguistics and Education*, Vol. 59, 100758.
- Nigris, E. (2002), *I conflitti a scuola. La mediazione pedagogico-didattica*, Milano: Mondadori.
- Novara, D. & Di Chio, C. (2013), *Litigare con metodo. Gestire i litigi dei bambini a scuola*, Trento: Erickson.
- Ochs, E., Kremer-Sadlik, T., Solomon, O. & Sirota, K.G. (2001), "Inclusion as social practice: views of children with autism", in *Social Development*, Vol. 10, n. 3, pp. 399-419.
- Ochs, E. & Schieffelin, B. (2017), "Language Socialization: An Historical Overview", in P. Duff & S. May, *Language socialization*, New York: Springer, pp. 3-17.
- Pontecorvo, C. (a cura di) (1993a), *La condivisione della conoscenza*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Ead. (1993b), "Forms of Discourse and Shared Thinking", in *Cognition and Instruction*, Vol. 11, n. 3/4, pp. 189-196.
- Pontecorvo, C., Ajello, A. & Zucchermaglio, C. (1991), *Discutendo si impara. Interazione e conoscenza a scuola*, Roma: Carocci.
- Pontecorvo, C., & Girardet, H. (1993), "Arguing and Reasoning in Understanding Historical Topics", in *Cognition and Instruction*, Vol. 11, n. 3/4, pp. 365-395.

- Thornborrow, J. (2003), “The organization of primary school children’s on-task and off-task talk in a small group setting”, in *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, Vol. 36, n. 1, pp. 7-32.
- Weiste, E., Stevanovic, M. & Lindholm, C. (2020), “Introduction: Social Inclusion as an Interactional Phenomenon”, in C. Lindholm, M. Stevanovic & E. Weiste, *Joint Decision Making in Mental Health*, Berlin: Springer, pp. 1-41.
- Zoletto, D. (2012), *Dall’intercultura ai contesti eterogenei. Presupposti teorici e ambiti di ricerca pedagogica*, Milano: FrancoAngeli.