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"Doing being an involved parent" : practices for building the family-school partnership in parent-child homework dialogues

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# **“Doing being an involved parent”. Practices for building the family-school partnership in parent-child homework dialogues**

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## **Abstract**

The present study investigates the increasingly common phenomenon of parental involvement in children’s education within a dialogic perspective. Drawing on video-recorded parent-child homework conversations in Italian families, and adopting a conversation analysis informed approach, the study analyzes how a value-laden cultural notion like ‘family-school partnership’ is given ‘dialogic existence’ through a variety of discursive practices. Specifically, it identifies four practices deployed by parents when supervising children’s homework: (1) making the teacher speak, (2) drawing parallels between family and school, (3) siding with the teacher, and (4) adopting a teacher-like evaluative stance. Beyond their specificities, all these practices reproduce the institutional culture of the school inside the home. It is argued that, through these practices, parents ‘do being involved’ in homework and implement a partnership based on shared values between family and school.

**Keywords:** Parent-child dialogues, homework, parental involvement, family-school partnership, Italy

## **1. Introduction**

Building on extensive research on parental involvement in children’s education (for the earliest studies on the topic, see Booth & Dunn 1996; Epstein 1990, 2001; Henderson & Berla 1994; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2001), in recent decades, policies in many western countries have been promoting the so-called ‘family-school partnership’ as the formula for maximizing students’ success and increasing social equality (Wingard & Forsberg 2009; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante 2015). These policies recommend that parents get involved in children’s school-related experiences and education by becoming active members of the school community, decision makers, educators’ supporters and, most importantly, “quasi-literacy teachers” at home (Blackmore & Hutchinson 2010, 503). Consistently with these policies, home-school relations have recently increased along

with expectations that ‘good parents’ get involved in children’s education and act like ‘school partners’ (Caronia & Colla 2021; Caronia & Dalledonne Vandini 2019; Forsberg 2009; Gottzén 2011; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante 2015; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik 2013). This paper investigates the phenomenon of ‘involved parenting’ from a *dialogic perspective* and analyzes how the abstract, morally dense notion of ‘family-school partnership’ is given ‘dialogic existence’ one interaction at a time, through the practices<sup>1</sup> whereby parents and children order their everyday life affairs (Garfinkel 1967; Sacks 1984). In particular, the study focuses on an ordinary activity that is commonly attributed a central role in the building of the family-school partnership: parent-assisted homework (Colla 2022a, 2022b; Caronia & Colla 2021). Being a school activity carried out inside the home, parent-assisted homework is uniquely suited to bridging the educational micro contexts of family and school (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Caronia 2021; Marsico et al. 2013) and constitutes a daily occasion for parents to get involved in their children’s education. However, and surprisingly, parent-assisted homework is still little explored as an arena for the dialogic construction of the family-school partnership and the implementation of cultural principles like parental involvement and ‘good parenting’. Indeed, previous studies focusing on homework have been mainly devoted to measuring the effectiveness of this activity (Cooper 1989a, 1989b; Cooper et al. 2006; Costa et al. 2016), identifying its consequences on children and family wellbeing (Kralovec & Buell 2000, 2001; Bennet & Kalish 2006; Kohn, 2006; Parodi 2016), and providing parents with instructions on how to get involved (see section n. 2 below). Only few studies have investigated parent-assisted homework as a site for the situated and inherently dialogic realization of parental involvement (see Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante 2015; Wingard 2006; Wingard & Forsberg 2009). This video-based study contributes to this underexplored line of inquiry by illustrating a series of practices whereby Italian parents get involved in homework and, in doing so, they demonstrate their orientation toward implementing the family-school partnership. Building on Sacks (1984), the article considers parental involvement as ‘something that people do’, a job that parents are visibly engaged in. ‘Being an involved parent’ is viewed as the collaboratively achieved product of situated, mainly dialogic, practices (Goffman 1959; Sacks 1984; Pillet-Shore 2015). It is in and through interactions with others – particularly with children during homework – that parents construct their own identities as ‘involved’ parents. By adopting an analytical approach centered on parent-child homework dialogues, this article illustrates and analyzes the practices whereby parents ‘do being

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<sup>1</sup> Although the term “practice” has been defined in many different ways (see among others, Bourdieu 1990; Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 2021; Schegloff 1997; Wenger 1998; for a review, see Sandberg & Tsoukas 2016), this study adopts a broad definition, considering ‘practice’ as a way of accomplishing a certain action. In this perspective, practices are to be viewed as always “situated in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to [them]” (Wenger 1998, 47).

involved' in homework, shedding light on parents' understanding of what it means to be 'a good, involved parent' as inscribed in and displayed by their ordinary practices of involvement.

## **2. Parental involvement in homework: recommendations from education studies and policies**

Previous research on parental involvement in homework has been largely devoted to providing recommendations and guidelines on how to achieve 'effective' parental involvement. These guidelines stress that parents should not so much teach school subjects but rather reproduce the system of rules and expectations that is typical of the institutional culture of the school. For example, Walker and colleagues (2004) stress that parents' support should encompass not only their active engagement in homework tasks but also and especially the meeting of school requests and the articulation of school rules, expectations, and standards. According to Epstein (1995, 1986), parents wishing to maximize children's learning should make their homes "school-like", that is they should duplicate the school in ways that increase the probability of students' school success. Interestingly, the guidelines issued by the Italian Ministry of Education seem to follow such pedagogical research as they specify that the family-school alliance should be based on the authentic *sharing of values* between parents and teachers (see Nota Miur 22/11/2012, "*Trasmissione linee di indirizzo*"). In sum, education research and policies converge in proposing a model of 'good parent' that resonates with Popkewitz's (2003) notion of "pedagogicalized parent", that is a competent "surrogate teacher" (p. 37) who does not merely supervise homework but is also able to reproduce the cultural and educational patterns of the school inside the home.

Consistently with these studies and guidelines, monitoring and helping children with the assignments has become a taken-for-granted task for 'good parents' (Forsberg 2009; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik 2013). Parents are expected to take part in children's homework activities and do that in ways that are aligned with the school culture. Homework has thus become an inherently *dialogic activity* involving both children and parents on a daily basis (Pontecorvo et al. 2013). Exploring homework dialogues in their turn-by-turn unfolding, the present study sheds light on the practices whereby Italian parents get involved in their children's homework. As will be shown in the analyses below (see section n. 4), parents' practices of involvement in homework display their orientation toward implementing the family-school partnership in ways that are consistent with pedagogical research and policies.

### **3. Data and analytic procedures**

The study is based on a corpus of 62 video-recorded homework sessions (totaling about 40 hours) where children happen to be assisted by their parents. The nineteen families involved in the study lived in the north of Italy and were composed of two working parents and at least one child attending primary school (i.e., aged 6-10 years old)<sup>2</sup>. Participants were recruited through the author's personal and work connections. To minimize the potential impact of the research setting, the video-recording process was self-administered by the parents. Participants' consent was obtained according to Italian law n. 196/2003 and EU Regulation n. 2016/679 (GDPR), which regulate the handling of personal and sensitive data.

Data have first been observed to identify if and how parents participated to the homework activity. After repeated observation of the data, it was noticed that parents appeared pervasively oriented to aligning with and reproducing the institutional culture of the school at home, and they monitored their children accordingly. Such an orientation was constant and displayed in a variety of ways<sup>3</sup>. However, it was particularly evident and clear when parents deployed four dialogic practices: (1) 'making the teacher speak' (Cooren 2010, 2012), (2) drawing parallels between family and school, (3) siding with the teacher, and (4) adopting a 'teacher-like' evaluative stance (see section n. 4 below). A collection of excerpts where these practices occurred was then created. The excerpts have been transcribed and analyzed by drawing on a conversation analysis informed approach (Jefferson 2004; Sacks et al. 1974; Sidnell & Stivers 2013). In line with a multimodal approach to social interaction (Goodwin 2000; Mondada 2016), transcripts have been enriched with notations for gaze directions, gestures, and body movements when ostensibly relevant for the participants to unfold the conversation. Transcripts are presented in two lines: the original Italian transcript is followed by an idiomatic translation in American English. For the sake of anonymity, all names have been fictionalized.

### **4. 'Doing being involved' in homework: Parents' dialogic practices**

As mentioned above, when supervising homework, parents in the study appeared pervasively oriented to reproducing the rules, expectations, and standards of the school, and they monitored

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<sup>2</sup> Only three families had an immigrant background. All families spoke Italian during the videorecorded homework sessions.

<sup>3</sup> For example, parents relied on 'school-like' discursive formats such as the 'initiation-reply-evaluation sequence' (Mehan 1979) and engaged in 'teacher-like' conducts such as doing scaffolding and explaining concepts (Caronia et al. forthcoming; Colla 2022a; Bolognesi & Dalledonne Vandini 2021).

their children accordingly. The analyses below illustrate the four above mentioned dialogic practices, which clearly exemplify this phenomenon. As the analysis shows, by reporting teachers' claims, making comparisons between family and school, rejecting children's challenges to teachers' authority, and using school-based standards to evaluate children's performance, parents unambiguously displayed their orientation toward reproducing the system of assumptions, norms, duties, standards, and expectations that characterize the institutional culture of the school (e.g., the teacher is the main, unquestionable authority, whose claims must be abided by; children's performance is to be evaluated according to the standards set by the school).

The analytic sections below delineate the features of each dialogic practice and illustrate the ways in which these practices were deployed in parent-child dialogue sequences.

#### 4.1. *Making the teacher speak*

The practice of 'making the teacher speak' was deployed in dialogic sequences where parents problematized children's conduct. This is consistent with Cooren's ventriloqual theory (Cooren 2010, 2012; Cooren & Bencherki 2010) according to which making someone (or something) speak is a resource for making one's behavior accountable and increasing personal authority. The following excerpt provides an example.

(1) "They asked you to write a little bit smaller"

F2H1 (14.10 – 14.30)

Mother; Ludovico (seven years old, second grade)

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Mother  | <i>((looks closely at what Ludovico has written))</i>   |
| 2 |   | ° <i>puoi scrivere un po' più piccolo e ordina:to?</i> °<br>°can you write a little bit smaller and <u>tidie:r?</u> °                     |
| 3 | Ludovico  | (o)k <i>((stretching toward the eraser))</i>  |
| 4 | 3 lines omitted: Mother and Ludovico discuss whether the child should erase what he has written |   |
| 5 | Ludovico  | <i>((starts erasing what he has written))</i>   |
| 6 | <b>Mother</b>   | <b><i>insomma &gt;ti han chiesto di scrivere&lt; un po' più piccolo, I mean &gt;they asked you to write&lt; a little bit smaller,</i></b> |
| 7 | Ludovico  | <i>((erases what he has written, then takes the pencil and rewrites it))</i>  |

After closely inspecting what Ludovico has written (line 1), the mother issues a request problematizing his handwriting (line 2). By asking the child to “write a little bit smaller and tidier”, she dialogically constructs his writing as sloppy and therefore problematic. Note that the mitigation in the mother’s request (she asks Ludovico to write “*a little bit* smaller and tidier”) appears to be displaying her orientation to the problematizing request as a dispreferred action that could threaten the child’s face (Goffman 1955).

A few turns later, after the problematizing request is granted by the child (he starts erasing his writing, line 5), the mother resorts to the dialogic practice of making the teacher speak: she recycles part of her previous turn (“write a little bit smaller”) and attributes it to the teachers (“*they asked you* to write a little bit smaller”, line 6). With this dialogic practice, she provides an account for the problematization. Yet, she does more than that. She also retrospectively frames the problematizing request in line 2 as *the teachers’* request rather than her own. Interestingly, this ‘ventriloquial practice’ (Cooren 2010, 2012) has a double, almost paradoxical effect. On one side, it downgrades the mother’s responsibility for the dispreferred action of problematizing the child’s writing. Indeed, making the teacher speak allows the mother to stage herself as the teachers’ “sounding box” (Goffman 1981, 226), as if she was made to speak by the teachers and *merely reporting* their request. Yet, at the same time, by reporting the teachers’ request, the mother also demonstrates she knows and shares the teachers’ deontic stance. In this way, she increases her own epistemic and deontic authority as a homework assistant (Heritage 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Heritage & Raymond 2005; Stevanovic 2013; Stevanovic & Peräkylä 2012).

In a similar way, in the next example the mother makes the teacher speak, thus sharing with her the authority and responsibility for problematizing the child’s writing.

(2) “Teacher Martina wants you to write in cursive”

F15H2 v.1 (07.30 – 07.50)

Mother; Roberta (eight years old, third grade)

- 1    Mother    *tu devi scrivere sempre in cons-in corsivo.*  
                   you always have to write in cuns-in cursive. ((staring at Roberta))
- 2                   (0.3) *la tua scrittura è il corsi:vo.*  
                   (0.3) your writing must be cursi:ve. ((staring at Roberta))
- 3                   no:, stampato minuscolo. =  
                   no:, printing. =
- 4                   = >stampato minuscolo< ti serve so:lo per saper leggere dai <libri>.  
                   = >printing< you o:nly need it to be able to read <books>.



5 (2.7)

6 Mother <non DEVI scrivere (.) in stampato minuscolo.>  
<you MUST not write (.) in printing.>

7 (1.6)

8 **Mother** *la maestra martina vuole che scrivete in stampa*-in: [corsivo.  
teacher martina wants you<sup>[plur.]</sup> to write in prin-in: [cursive.

9 Roberta [corsivo.  
[cursive.

When the mother notices that Roberta has been writing in printing instead of cursive (not transcribed), she problematizes this conduct extensively by repeatedly formulating rules and directives. In line 1, she issues the general rule (“you always have to write in curs-cursive”). Note that the occurrence of the subject pronoun (“*tu*”) is marked in Italian<sup>4</sup> and emphasizes the child’s personal responsibility for the problematic behavior. In addition, the use of the temporal adverb “always” dialogically constructs the rule as absolute, thus framing Roberta’s behavior as indisputably wrong. The mother then insists on the rule: she formulates it twice by making explicit how Roberta must and must not write (lines 2 and 3). She also explains what the printing should be used for (i.e., reading, not writing, line 4) and finally issues the negative rule clarifying how the child must *not* write (line 6). This extended problematization sequence (lines 1-6) projects a strong epistemic and deontic asymmetry between Roberta and her mother, framing the latter as the unquestionable epistemic and deontic authority over homework.

After almost two seconds during which the child remains silent (line 7), the mother ‘makes the teacher speak’: she dialogically constructs “writing in cursive” as something that teacher Martina wants for her students (line 8). Similarly to the previous excerpt (ex. 1), the mother’s ventriloqual practice in line 8 makes her behavior accountable and retrospectively frames the extended problematization sequence as dependent on teacher Martina’s will. As in the previous example, this dialogic practice allows the mother to downgrade her own responsibility for the dispreferred action of problematizing the child’s writing. Yet, at the same time, it also increases her epistemic and deontic authority by presenting the extended problematization sequence as based on, and aligned with, the teacher’s will.

In sum, by making the teacher speak, the mothers in ex. 1 and 2 navigate their own responsibility and authority as homework assistants. This dialogic practice clearly shows their orientation toward aligning with the teachers’ requests: by referring to the teachers’ requests as

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<sup>4</sup> Italian is a pro-drop language.

accounts, the mothers demonstrate to be assuming the imperative of meeting school expectations when doing homework. This assumption is visibly taken-for-granted and reproduced as a totally self-evident principle by these parents as it was by others in the study: the foundational belief of the school culture according to which teachers' claims must be abided by is thus ratified and reproduced inside the home. By 'making the teachers speak', the mothers in the study echoed a fundamental pillar of the school culture at home.

The next section illustrates another dialogic practice whereby parents made relevant school rules and expectations inside the home: drawing parallels between family and school.

#### 4.2. *Drawing parallels between family and school*

Parents in the study happened to draw more or less explicit parallels between family and school, thus suggesting the existence of similarities between these contexts. For example, they did that by using lexical items typical of the school culture to describe their home-based activities, as in the next example.

(3) "I have to do my homework too"

F1H1 v.2 (10.55 – 11.15)

Mother; Vale (six years old, first grade)

- 1 Mother ((opens Vale's notebook and reads it))
- 2 **io (.) devo fare anche io il mio compito**  
**I (.) have to do my homework too**
- 3 ((points to the open notebook))
- 4 >devo mettere< i quattro euro: per il teatro  
 >I have to give< the four euro:s for the theatre
- 5 Vale eh lo so:  
 eh I kno:w that

In line 2, the mother uses a lexical item typical of the school culture ("homework") to refer to the home-based activity she is about to engage in (i.e., providing the money for Vale's school theatre activity). By adopting such a school-related term, the mother describes her activity in a way that is meaningful to the child-pupil, while displaying her orientation to the activity as mandatory. What is worth noting is that the use of this term dialogically creates an analogy between family and school, conveying that the same kind of activities are carried out in the two contexts. Such a continuity and

similarity between family and school is also conveyed in a more subtle way. With the deontic phrase “I have to do” (line 2), the mother presents satisfying the school request as an inescapable obligation for her. In other words, by claiming that she has her ‘homework to do’, the mother stages herself as subject to school obligations, thus ratifying the validity of school rules in the family context. As this example shows, the practice of drawing parallels between family and school discursively constructs a moral horizon common to these educational institutions and, therefore, enacts the model of “school-like families” (Epstein 1995, 83) in and through dialogue.

Siding with the teacher is another practice that presupposes and locally constructs a shared cultural and moral horizon, thus locally conveying the existence of a partnership based on common values, norms, and expectations between parents and teachers.

#### 4.3. *Siding with the teacher*

The practice of siding with the teacher was deployed by parents in sequences where children questioned teachers’ decisions or held the teachers responsible for their own inappropriate behavior. When teachers’ authority was challenged in such ways, the parents in the study sided with the teachers by rejecting children’s claims and problematizing their conduct. In the next excerpt, the child (Roberta) treats the teacher as responsible for her own failure to take home the science book for homework. In response, the mother sides with the teacher and holds the child accountable for her own conduct.

(4) “The teacher does not need to tell you”

F15H1 v.3 (00.00 – 00.35)

Mother; Roberta (eight years old, third grade)

- 1 Roberta *non me l’ha de:tto la maestra di prenderlo.*  
the teacher didn’t te:ll me to take it.\*
- 2 **Mother** *ma vedi robe:rta >la differenza è che<*  
*but you see robe:rta >the difference is that<*
- 3 *non te lo †DE::VE dire la maestra,*  
*the teacher does not †NEE::D to tell you,*
- 4 *TU:: devi sapere cosa ti devi portare <a casa>.*  
*YOU:: need to know what you have to take <home>.*
- 5 (1.0)
- 6 *lo <sai> che al giovedì:, hai i compiti: da fare per il venerdì:*  
*you <know> that on thursda:y, you have homewo:rk for frida:y*

7                   (.) >perché se non li hai fatti martedì< che eravamo a ca:sa,  
 (.) >since you haven't done it on tuesday< when we were at ho:me,

8                   (5.0)

9     Mother       è †vero o no?  
 is that †true or not?

10                  (3.0) ((Roberta eats an apple slice and looks at the tablet))

11    **Mother**     †tu devi sapere i compiti che ci sono da <fare>.  
 †you need to know the homework that has to <be done>.

12                  mica te lo deve dire la maestra  
 the teacher does not need to tell you

\* it = the science book

When the mother reproaches Roberta for failing to take home the science book necessary for homework (not transcribed), the child accounts for her conduct by referring to the teacher's classroom talk ("the teacher didn't tell me to take it", line 1). Through this account, Roberta attributes the responsibility for her failure to the teacher and presents herself as a disciplined student who simply complies with the teacher's instructions. Clearly enough, the child's turn also conveys an implicit criticism of the teacher, who is treated as being at fault for not telling Roberta the right thing to do (i.e., taking home the science book).

In response to Roberta's blaming of the teacher, the mother sides with the teacher. First, she frames the teacher as not in charge of telling Roberta what to do ("the teacher does not need to tell you", line 3). In this way, the mother rejects the child's implicit criticism of the teacher, relieves the teacher from any responsibility for the child's inappropriate behavior, and conveys the teacher's conduct as totally unproblematic. After that, the mother frames the *child*, rather than the teacher, as responsible for her own inappropriate conduct ("you need to know what you have to take home", line 4). In particular, the mother's turn (line 4) constructs the child as responsible for knowing autonomously and independently of teacher's instructions what books need to be taken home for homework. Note that the child's personal responsibility is stressed through the prosodically marked subject pronoun "you", while the deontic verb ("you need to know", line 4) presents the child's lack of knowledge as a moral breach (Stivers et al. 2011). The child's responsibility to know and decide about homework as well as the flawless character of the teacher's conduct are further stressed by the mother a few seconds later. After making explicit the line of reasoning that should guide Roberta in assessing the homework situation (lines 6-9), the mother makes relevant again the

child's obligation to know about homework ("you need to know the homework that has to be done", line 11) and relieves the teacher from any responsibility and blame ("the teacher does not need to tell you", line 12). In sum, the mother sides with the teacher throughout the excerpt: she rejects the criticism of the teacher and problematizes the child's lack of knowledge instead. Thanks to the mother's conversational work (lines 2-4, 11-12), the teacher is dialogically constructed as a flawless authority that cannot be held responsible or criticized for the child's inappropriate conduct. The school assumption according to which the teacher is a reliable authority is thus echoed and ratified inside the home.

The next excerpt shows how another mother sides with the teacher against the child. Similarly to ex. 4, the mother rejects the child's criticism of the teacher's homework-related behavior and problematizes the child's conduct.

(5) "It's your duty"

F3H6 (43.10 – 43.45)

Mother; Benedetta (seven years old, second grade)

- 1 Benedetta *oh:: dobbiamo colorare anche le MASchere*  
oh:: we have to color the MAsks too ((whining))
- 2 *ma perché la maestra >ci ha dato< così tanti co:mpiti:?*  
but why did the teacher >give us< so much ho:mewo:rk? ((whining))
- 3 **Mother** *ma dhha:i che non è vero=*  
**but chho:me on that's not true=**
- 4 Benedetta *=son tanti:ssimi::*  
*=it's a lo:::t ((whining))*
- 5 **Mother** *ma va là (.) tu non hai mai visto come sono tanti compiti*  
**that's not true (.) you have never seen what a lot of homework is**
- 6 (2.0)
- 7 Benedetta *c'ho da fare quarantamila operaz:ioni cioè*  
I have to do forty thousand calcula:tions, I mean ((in an irritated tone))
- 8 (3.0)
- 9 **Mother** *è il tuo dovere eh.*  
**it's your duty eh.**
- 10 (3.0)
- 11 **Mother** *mica lamenta:rti*  
**don't complai:n**

After reading the instructions on the homework page (not transcribed), Benedetta suddenly remembers (see the change of state token “oh” in the turn at line 1, Heritage 1984b) an additional assignment (“we have to color the masks too”, line 1). This sudden recollection is followed by a complaint about the teacher’s behavior formatted as a request for account (“but why did the teacher give us so much homework?”, line 2; on requests for account, see Sterponi 2003). Importantly, the request for account works not only as a complaint about the exaggerate amount of homework (“so much”) but also as a criticism against the teacher. Indeed, the format of the request for an account presents the teacher’s homework-related behavior as incomprehensible, thus questioning its moral appropriateness (Sterponi 2003; Bolden & Robinson 2011). Furthermore, by explicitly referring to the teacher as the *subject* of the sentence, Benedetta attributes to her the full agency, and therefore responsibility, in the problematized action of giving “so much homework” (on human agency coded in linguistic forms, see for example Duranti 1994, 1997; Duranti & Ochs 1990). In this way, and by means of resorting to a whiny tone (line 2), Benedetta complains about the amount of homework and blames it on the teacher. Evidently, the child’s complaint makes relevant the affiliation of her interlocutor, i.e., the mother (Drew 1998; Couper-Kuhlen 2012). However, instead of showing empathy, the mother openly disaffiliates with the child. In her reply (line 3), she urges Benedetta to stop complaining (“come on”) and bluntly denies her characterization of homework as “so much” (“that’s not true”). In this way, the mother rejects not only the child’s complaint about homework but also her criticism of the teacher’s homework-related conduct.

Despite the mother’s reply, Benedetta continues her complaint trajectory seeking affiliation; she maintains the whiny tone and further stresses the exaggerate amount of homework by describing it as “a lot” (line 4). Even though the turn in line 4 does not contain any explicit reference to the teacher, nevertheless it can be heard as conveying another criticism of the teacher as she is evidently the one responsible for assigning “a lot” of homework. In line 5, the mother rejects the child’s complaint and (implicit) criticism of the teacher again: she denies the child’s claim (“that’s not true”) and delegitimizes her as a complainer on the basis of her scarce experience (“you have never seen what a lot of homework is”, line 5).

After a two-second gap (line 6), Benedetta continues complaining about homework, this time in an irritated tone. She reports the assignments through an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986) that emphasizes their quantity (“I have to do *forty thousand* calculations, I mean”, line 7). By shifting from generic descriptions of the complainable (“so much” in line 2 and “a lot” in line 4) to a detailed, albeit still exaggerated, description of it (“*forty thousand* calculations”, line 7), Benedetta provides a more accurate recount of her grievance, which makes the mother’s affiliation even more sequentially relevant (Drew 1998; Drew & Holt 1988). However, instead of affiliating with

Benedetta, the mother frames doing homework as the child’s duty (“it’s your duty eh”, line 9) and issues a negative directive urging the child to stop complaining (“don’t complain”, line 11). Through these final turns (lines 9 and 11), the mother ends the discussion on the amount of homework (too much *vs* not too much), treating it as irrelevant, and conveys the child’s moral obligation to do homework regardless of its amount. What emerges throughout this excerpt is the mother’s orientation to the idea that the teacher’s homework-related decision cannot be questioned by the child. By repeatedly rejecting and even problematizing the child’s complaint and criticism (lines 3, 5, 9 and 11), the mother takes the teacher’s side and conveys the belief that her conduct is totally unquestionable.

Such an assumption, which is in fact constitutive of the morality of the school, is visibly assumed and conveyed by the mother in the next excerpt as well. Similarly to what we have seen in ex. 4 and 5, this mother sides with the teacher by dialogically constructing her as an unquestionable authority over homework-related matters. We join the conversation when the mother has just finished quizzing her child Tania on the history lesson due the next day.

(6) “She can even give you ten because she’s the teacher”

F5H4 (12.20 – 12.55)

Mother; Tania (nine years old, fourth grade)

- |   |               |   |
|---|---------------|---|
| 1 | Mother        | <i>allora secondo me bisogna che lo &lt;rigua:rdi&gt; eh (.) perché=</i><br>ok in my opinion you need to <loo:k at it again> eh (.) because=                      |
| 2 | Tania         | <i>=sì ma n::on ci può dare [all’inizio della scuola qua-]</i><br>=yes but she can::’t give us [at the beginning of the school fo-]<br><i>((in a whiny tone))</i> |
| 3 | <b>Mother</b> | <b>[no lei può.]</b><br><b>[no she can.]</b>  |
| 4 |               | <b>lei può.</b><br><b>she can.</b>  |
| 5 | Tania         | <i>quattro pa:gine::</i><br><i>four pa:ge::s ((in an irritated tone))</i>   |
| 6 | Mother        | <i>sì te ne può dare anche &lt;dieci&gt; ^perché lei è l’insegna::nte.</i><br><i>yes she can even give you &lt;ten&gt; ^because she’s the tea::cher.</i>          |
| 7 | Tania         | <i>^((moves the history book to her side and starts reading it))</i>  |
| 8 | Mother        | <b>lei può.</b><br><b>she can.</b>  |

9                    *è che tu, quando vieni a casa,*  
                       *the thing is that you, when you come home,*

10                   *non ti metti a guardare i video ma ti metti a studiare*  
                       *don't get to watch videos but start to do your homework*

After Tania's poor performance in the quiz (not transcribed), the mother suggests that she should revise the lesson (line 1), thus conveying a negative evaluation of her performance. In her reply, Tania rapidly accepts the mother's suggestion and implicit negative evaluation ("yes", line 2); then she starts complaining about the amount of homework. More specifically, the child denies the legitimacy of the teacher's homework-related behavior at that specific time of the year ("she can't give us at the beginning of the school fo-", line 2). Interestingly, Tania's claim is recognizable as a form of "polyphonic repetition" (Bazzanella 1993). That is, the child uses fragments of discourses against homework that circulate as dialogical routines in the cultural-linguistic community (see among others, Kralovec & Buell 2000; Parodi 2016). Voicing these commonly held beliefs about homework is functional to increasing the child's authority in questioning the teacher's conduct as the child's claim appears to be shared with a large community rather than made by the child alone (Cooren 2010, 2012). It is also worth noting that, by denying the legitimacy of the teacher's homework-related conduct, Tania implicitly provides a justification for her poor performance in the history quiz.

Similarly to what we have seen in ex. 5, the child's complaint and criticism is followed by the mother's overt disaffiliation. In lines 3 and 4, the mother rejects the child's complaint in a totally unmitigated way: not only does she produce her disagreement turn with no delay and in partial overlapping with the child, but she also plainly contradicts the child's claim with the disagreement token "no" and by recycling part of the child's turn in a reversed polarity ("she can"). The concise and generic deontic claim "she can" repeated twice (lines 3 and 4) dialogically constructs the teacher as the unquestionable deontic authority over homework, in clear opposition with Tania's claims. Through this openly disaffiliating turn, the mother takes the teacher's side and presents her homework-related behavior as a non-debatable matter.

However, Tania continues pursuing her complaint trajectory, this time by problematizing the amount of homework ("four pages", line 5). Rejecting the child's complaint once again, the mother confirms and even upgrades her previous deontic claims with a conforming extreme example ("she can even give you ten", line 6) followed by a 'quasi-tautological' account ("because she's the



teacher”, line 6). The extreme example and quasi-tautological account further present the teacher as an absolute authority whose homework-related decisions cannot be overturned.

Even after Tania has visibly abandoned the complaint trajectory (she starts revising the history lesson, line 7), the mother further sides with the teacher. First, she affirms the teacher’s unquestionable authority by recycling her previous deontic claim in a final intonation (“she can.”, line 8). Then, she problematizes the *child’s* conduct (lines 9 and 10). Through the pivot phrase “the thing is that you” (line 9), the mother shifts the blame and responsibility onto the child. At this point, the mother criticizes the child’s time management by describing the appropriate after-school plan she should keep to, that is studying instead of watching videos (lines 9 and 10). The antithetic construction “you don’t get to..., but you start to...” (line 10) creates an opposition between doing homework and watching videos, constituting these activities as mutually exclusive and conveying homework as the required, morally appropriate activity that the child should prioritize. In sum, with these final turns (lines 9 and 10), the mother further takes the teacher’s side as she retrospectively frames the child’s poor homework performance as dependent not on the teacher’s inappropriate homework-related behavior (as suggested by the child in lines 2 and 5), but rather on the child’s bad time management. In a few words, what the mother makes relevant in this dialogue is the taken-for-granted idea that the teacher is not at fault and cannot be blamed by the child.

As we have seen, the mothers in examples 4, 5, and 6 ratified teachers’ authority and dialogically constructed themselves as *teacher’s allies* inside the home. In this sense, the dialogic practice of siding with the teacher clearly shows parents’ orientation toward establishing an alliance between parents and teachers, family and school. At the same time, these practices can be seen as implementing such an alliance in and through mundane parent-child conversations. Indeed, by taking the teachers’ side, the mothers in the study ratified a key principle of the school culture: the teacher is the main authority whose decisions cannot be refused.

#### **4.4. *Adopting a teacher-like evaluative stance***

Parents’ orientation toward aligning with teachers’ expectations was particularly visible when parents adopted a ‘teacher-like’ evaluative stance (Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante 2015). On these occasions, parents made relevant teacher-like standards as the benchmark for evaluating the child’s homework performance, thus reproducing the assessment patterns, procedures, and scales typical of the school institutional culture. The brief exchange below provides an example. Here, Silvia and her mother are discussing how to carry out the quiz activity at home.

(7) “As the teacher will probably do”

F17H1 v. 1 (00.06 – 00.12)

Mother; Silvia (nine years old, fourth grade)

- 1        Mother        *possiamo far così. o ti faccio delle domande:*,  
                         we can do it that way. either I ask you some question:ns,
- 2                        *così (.) sparse*  
                         like this (.) random
- 3        Silvia        mh,
- 4        **Mother**        ***come farà: probabilmente la maestra,***  
                         ***as the teacher will probably do:***,

Albeit being short, this excerpt clearly shows the mother's orientation to evaluating the child's homework performance according to teacher-like standards. The excerpt begins when the mother proposes to quiz Silvia by asking her a series of random questions (lines 1 and 2). What is worth noting is that the mother accounts for her proposal by advancing that this quizzing style is likely to be the same that the teacher is going to adopt at school ("as the teacher will probably do", line 4). In so doing (line 4), the mother demonstrates she takes for granted the imperative of 'being school-like', that is mirroring the teacher's evaluative stance and assessing the child according to school-established standards and procedures. The mother's orientation to such an imperative is further displayed a few seconds later, when she starts quizzing Silvia.

(8) "What question the teacher could ask you"

F17H1 v. 1 (00.55 – 01.01)

Mother; Silvia (nine years old, fourth grade)

- 1        **Mother**        *allo:ra (.) m: vediamo un po' che c- che domanda*  
                         *we:ll (.) m: let's see what wh- what question*
- 2                        *potrebbe d:irti la maestra*  
                         *the teacher could a:sk you*
- 3                        (0.5) *che cos'è la scienza?*  
                         (0.5) what is science?

Before asking Silvia the first question (which is produced in line 3), the mother voices her intention to adopt a teacher-like evaluative stance in the quiz activity. By wondering about the questions that

the teacher could ask (lines 1 and 2), the mother makes relevant and “talks into being” (Heritage 1984a, 290) her orientation to reproducing the school situation at home and evaluate the child’s homework performance in ways that are consistent with the teacher’s standards. Interestingly, adopting a teacher-like evaluative stance appears to be a useful dialogic practice for the mother to increase her own epistemic and deontic authority as a homework assistant. Indeed, by demonstrating that she knows and shares the teacher’s evaluative methods and standards, the mother presents herself as a competent, school-aligned homework assistant who is entitled not only to quiz the child but also and above all to make the appropriate evaluation of her homework performance.

In a similar fashion, the mother in the next example adopts a teacher-like evaluative stance. In this case, she evokes the ‘gaze of the teacher’ as the benchmark according to which the child’s homework must be assessed.

(9) “If one sees homework done like this, what does one say?”

F1H1 v.2 (08.45 – 10.35)

Mother; Vale (six years old, first grade)

- 1 Mother *qui hai colorato abbastanza bene, qua:, ^secondo me:,*  
here you have colored quite well, he:re, ^in my opinio:n,
- 2 *image))* ^((turns the page and points to an
- 3 *puoi colorare un po' me:glia. mi sbaglio?*  
you can color a bit be:tter. am I wrong?
- 4 Vale *((laughs softly and takes a crayon))*
- 5 Mother *fai a mo:do.*  
do it pro:perly.
- 6 45 seconds not transcribed: Vale colors all the images on the page. The mother looks at her.
- 7 Vale *((places the crayon on the table))*
- 8 **Mother** *secondo te, se uno vede un compito fatto così*  
**in your opinion, if one sees homework done like this**
- 9 *(.) o uno fatto tutto- colorato un po' male, cosa dice?*  
**(.) or homework done all- colored a bit badly, what does one say?**
- 10 *c'è differenza o è ugua:le?*  
**is there a difference or is it the sa:me?**
- 11 Vale *differenza*  
difference
- 12 Mother *eh sì. adesso va mo:lto meglio †brava.*  
right. now it's mu:ch better †well done.

The exchange begins when the mother is checking the homework exercises done by Vale. In lines 1-3, the mother issues a negative evaluation of the child's coloring in a very mitigated way. By emphasizing the child's ability to slightly improve her work ("you can color a bit better", line 3) and asking for the child's confirmation ("am I wrong?", line 3), the mother problematizes the work done by the child while also demonstrating her own orientation toward protecting the child's face and confidence despite the negative evaluation. When Vale displays her intention to do the coloring all over again (she takes a crayon, line 4), the mother orders her to "do [homework] properly" (line 5). This directive works both retrospectively and prospectively: it further problematizes the child's coloring done until then while making prospectively relevant the child's full commitment to the coloring activity. Vale fully complies with the mother's directive by re-crayoning all the images on the homework page (line 6). Once she finishes (line 7), the mother opens a sequence of reflexive moral talk (Kremer-Sadlik 2019) by asking the child what anyone would say about her well-colored work compared to work "all colored a bit badly" (lines 8-10). With this request, the mother evokes the idea that the child's homework is going to be evaluated by someone else ("one"), who is evidently the teacher. In this way, the teacher's evaluative stance is referred to – although not explicitly mentioned as such – as the benchmark according to which the child's homework must be assessed. Similarly to ex. 7 and 8, evoking the teacher's evaluative stance is functional to increasing the mother's authority in assessing the child's homework performance as it demonstrates the mother's knowledge of and compliance with school standards. Yet, this example also shows how *the child is prompted to adopt a teacher-like evaluative stance* in order to make a self-assessment of her own work. By making relevant the teacher's evaluation, the mother socializes Vale into keeping in mind the teacher's standards and expectations when doing homework. Through her answer (line 11), Vale demonstrates that she can adopt a teacher-like evaluative stance and self-assess her homework accordingly.

In sum, ex. 7, 8, and 9 clearly show how the mothers in the study reproduced a further, foundational dimension of the school culture: the evaluation standards and procedures. By displaying their intention to align with the teachers' evaluative stance, the mothers in the study ratified the validity of the assessment system used at school and mirrored it inside the home.

## **5. Parental involvement and the family-school partnership as dialogic accomplishments.**

### **Concluding discussion**

Considering parental involvement and the family-school partnership as collaboratively achieved products of situated practices deployed in interaction with others, this paper has illustrated the dialogic ways in which the parents in the study ‘did being involved’ in their children’s homework and displayed their orientation toward achieving the ‘sharing of values’ between family and school that is at the core of the notion of family-school partnership. As the analysis has shown, parents demonstrated their orientation toward aligning with and reproducing the institutional culture of the school, i.e., its rules, expectations, assumptions, and standards. In particular, the analysis has described four dialogic practices: (1) making the teacher speak, (2) drawing parallels between family and school, (3) siding with the teacher, and (4) adopting a teacher-like evaluative stance. These practices were deployed by parents in the unfolding of ordinary homework conversations as a means to accomplish specific activities. For example, the practice of making the teacher speak was deployed in problematization sequences and established parents as the teachers’ spokespersons inside the home. This ventriloquial practice (Cooren 2010, 2012) increased parents’ epistemic and deontic authority insofar as it displayed their knowledge of and alignment with teachers’ requests. At the same time, ‘ventriloquizing’ the teacher allowed the parents to stage themselves as being ‘made to speak’ by the teacher, thus downgrading their own responsibility for the problematization (ex. 1 and 2). By conveying an analogy between family and school, the practice of drawing parallels between family and school suggested the existence of a cultural and moral horizon common to these educational micro contexts (ex. 3). The sharing of a moral horizon between family and school was also conveyed by the dialogic practice of siding with the teacher. Through this practice, the mothers in the study ratified the unquestionable nature of teachers’ authority inside the home (ex. 4-6). Finally, by adopting a teacher-like evaluative stance, parents presented their assessments as ‘school-like’ and therefore increased their authority in evaluating the child’s homework performance (as in ex. 7-9). This practice also constituted a socializing tool educating children into taking into account teachers’ evaluation and doing homework accordingly (ex. 9).

Beyond their different and specific functions in conversational sequences, all these practices constitute dialogic means whereby parents reproduced the cultural patterns and moral horizons of the school inside the home and, in so doing, they demonstrated to assume the value-laden imperative of building the family-school partnership. As the analysis has shown, parents in the study monitored children’s homework in ways that maximized the continuity and sharing of values between family and school. By echoing teachers’ claims, teaming up with the teacher, and

mirroring the school culture and evaluative standards inside the home, parents displayed their orientation toward the taken-for-granted objective of creating a partnership based on a system of shared values, norms, and expectations between family and school. At the same time, parents implemented such a value-based partnership in and through the unfolding of homework conversations. In this sense, the dialogic practices analyzed in this study seem to actually perform the functions of bridging family and school and building the family-school alliance that are typically attributed to parent-assisted homework by pedagogical research and policies (e.g., Caronia & Colla 2021; Epstein 1995; Montalbetti & Lisimberti 2020). Interestingly, the family-school partnership visibly assumed, evoked, and implemented through these dialogic practices appears to have the effect of reinforcing both parents' and teachers' authority. By dialogically constructing family and school as twin institutions sharing values and rules, these practices contributed to creating a mutually supportive relationship between family and school as well as a dialogic landscape where parents' and teachers' voices authorize and reinforce each other.

These dialogic practices are particularly interesting as they display parents' morally and culturally informed understanding of what it means to be a 'good, involved parent' during homework. As the analysis has shown, in and through the situated unfolding of dialogues, the mothers in the study acted like "pedagogicalized parents" (Popkewitz 2003): they discursively reproduced the main features of the institutional culture of the school inside the domestic walls, thus creating "school-like homes" (Epstein 1995, 83). In so doing, the mothers complied with the model of 'involved parenting' proposed by pedagogical studies and policies and largely ratified as an unquestionable moral benchmark (Forsberg 2009). Through their contingent and intrinsically *dialogic* ways of accomplishing involvement in homework, the mothers 'did being an involved parent' (Sacks 1984; Pillet-Shore 2015); they enacted and displayed their understanding of 'good parenting' by performing the role of engaged, culturally aligned school partners.

In sum, as this study has illustrated, cultural and moral benchmarks like 'family-school partnership' and 'involved parenting' constitute dialogic accomplishments achieved through a series of situated practices, one interaction at a time. The meanings attached to such value-laden cultural notions are displayed, elaborated, and negotiated in the unfolding of the interactions whereby people manage everyday activities and "order their affairs" (Sacks 1984, 24). It is through contingent dialogues and the practices that underpin them that taken-for-granted and abstract – yet highly morally relevant – cultural notions are given dialogic existence.

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