More than learning. Parent-assisted homework as an arena for moral education

Vittoria Colla

Vittoria Colla[*]

Abstract

Pedagogical research has long and extensively investigated homework as a parent-involvement activity characterized by 'teacher-like' educational practices aimed at fostering children's subject-related knowledge and academic success. However, little is known about the educational relevance of this activity beyond formal learning and academic-related instruction. Drawing on video-recorded parent-child homework sessions, this conversation analysis-informed study illustrates that homework is a vehicle of knowledge far beyond the academic subject-matters. In subtle yet pervasive ways, homework provides parents and children with moments of 'ethical reflexivity', occasions to evoke and educate each other into moral ideologies concerning a variety of topics such as virtue, autonomy, the existence of social roles and related duties, rights, and responsibilities. Illustrating how moral talk is afforded by contingent, homework-related interactions, this article promotes parents' awareness of the moral and educational relevance of the often unnoticed and deemed-as-irrelevant conversations that sprinkle ordinary family life.

Keywords: *Parent-child interaction; assignments; morality; ethical reflexivity; informal education.*

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, the idea that parents should get involved in children's school life and formal learning activities has gradually become an unquestionable "educational postulate" (Gigli, 2016: 135, our translation; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015; Colla, 2022a). Based on early studies on parental involvement (e.g., Booth & Dunn, 1996; Epstein, 1990, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2001)[1], policies in

---

[*]   Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia (Italy).
1   Early studies on parental involvement have particularly stressed the positive outcomes of parents' participation in children's school-related activities, whereas later studies have also identified the negative consequences and problematic dimensions of parental involvement (Blackmore & Hutchinson, 2010; Contini, 2012; Weininger & Lareau, 2003).

many western countries like Italy have recommended that parents should act as involved members of the school community, educators' supporters, and "quasi-literacy teachers" at home (Blackmore & Hutchinson, 2010: 503). Home-school relations have therefore gradually increased to the point that 'good parents' are nowadays expected to play an active role in children's school-related education and experiences (Caronia & Dalledonne Vandini, 2019; Forsberg, 2009; Gottzén, 2011; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2013). Being a school activity carried out in the domestic space, homework is considered a key arena for implementing parental involvement, a daily and precious occasion to take part in children's school-related activities and promote their formal learning (Colla, 2022a; Bolognesi & Dalledonne Vandini, 2020; Montalbetti & Lisimberti, 2020; Pontecorvo *et al.*, 2013). Research shows that parental assistance with homework has increased in recent years and completing the assignments has become a constitutive component of family routines (Izquierdo *et al.*, 2006; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015)[2]. Not surprisingly then, a considerable amount of pedagogical research has focused on homework and offered guidelines on how to support children in this activity (see among others, Epstein, 1995; Meirieu, 2002; Walker *et al.*, 2004). For example, Epstein (1995) suggests that parents should take part in homework by discussing what children are learning in class and by helping them acquire new skills. In a similar vein, Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* (2001) and Walker *et al.* (2004) propose a series of actions that parents should carry out to improve students' motivation and performance, such as providing general oversight of the homework activity, doing exercises with the student, and creating 'a fit' between learning tasks and students' skills through the deployment of scaffolding practices. Beyond their specificities, these and similar guidelines share the intent to foster parents' capacity to serve as "surrogate teachers" (Popkewitz, 2003: 37), i.e., parents' capacity to promote children's subject-related learning and skills in solving school tasks. Throughout the years, these guidelines have become part of common sense: the idea that parents should engage in teacher-like activities during homework is nowadays widely spread, taken-for-granted, and put into practice in everyday family life (Cunha, 2015; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015). Research has documented that, when doing homework with their children, parents adopt a 'teacher-like' behavior and deploy a series of intentional, learning-oriented practices aimed at developing the child's competences and knowledge in directions that are consistent with the school curriculum. For example, parents test children, do scaffolding, explain concepts, and rely on 'school-like' question formats such as the initiation-reply-evaluation sequence (Colla, 2023; Caronia *et al.*, 2023; Bolognesi & Dalledonne Vandini, 2020, 2021). The deployment of such practices demonstrates that parents are mindful of the crucial effects that

---

2   Italian parents spend about eight hours a week doing homework with their children (Di Cristofaro, 2018).

their involvement in homework can have on children's formal learning, school results, and academic career.

Yet, parents are probably less aware that parent-assisted homework is far more than a learning-oriented activity characterized by intentional teaching practices. Indeed, pedagogical research has not yet sufficiently explored parent-assisted homework as an activity whereby children acquire not only subject-related knowledge, but also a culture-specific moral expertise, which allows them to navigate the ordinary experiences in the socio-cultural communities they belong to. As this study shows, homework constitutes an 'ethically dense' activity providing parents and children with a relevant arena for *moral education*. Adopting a phenomenological approach to the study of educational events (Bertolini, 1988; Caronia, 2011, 2018, 2020), and relying on the analysis of naturally occurring parent-child conversations, the present article illustrates that homework provides precious moments of "ethical reflexivity" (Kremer-Sadlik, 2019: 195; Keane, 2014a, 2014b, 2016), i.e., unique occasions for parents and children to make moral claims and educate each other into taken-for-granted moral ideologies (Colla, 2022a, 2022b). By zooming in on everyday family conversations during homework, the article shows how this apparently banal and routinary activity affords practices of "informal education" (Tramma, 2009) promoting children's socialization into morally competent subjects. Shedding light on the *moral density* of a formal, subject-related learning activity like homework, the article also illustrates the deep intertwining of school-related learning and cultural education. In this perspective, the present work challenges traditional pedagogical categories such as 'formal' and 'informal' learning, 'intentional' and 'non-intentional' education, questioning the possibility of conceiving them as neatly separate and separable phenomena. In promoting a rethinking of such categories and the acknowledgement of the moral and educational import of ordinary family activities like homework, the present study will offer precious insights for parents' reflexivity as well as for pre-service and in-service teacher training.

The article is structured as follows. The next section (n. 2) provides a review of literature on morality in everyday family life, with a particular focus on homework as a morality-building activity. After a brief description of the corpus and methodology of the study (section n. 3), we will present a series of excerpts that demonstrate the moral density of parent-child homework interactions (section n. 4). The analyses illustrate that homework provides parents and children with occasions to evoke, negotiate, and appropriate moral beliefs and expectations concerning a variety of topics such as virtue, autonomy, the existence of social roles and related duties, rights, and responsibilities. As delineated in the final section (n. 5), the results of this study constitute a valuable resource for both parent education and teacher training. Showing how practices of formal and informal learning co-exist and shape each other, the present article can foster parents' "epistemic vigilance" (Caronia, 2020: 60), helping them become more

aware of the enormous moral and educational work they carry out in the unfolding of homework and, more broadly, in everyday family activities. At the same time, by illustrating how homework is actually done inside the home, the present study can increase teachers' awareness of and critical reflections about the educational impact of such an ordinary – and often taken-for-granted – practice.

2. Morality and education in everyday parent-child interactions. The case of homework

Studies in fields as different as psychology (Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2007; Fasulo & Pontecorvo, 1999), linguistic anthropology (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007, 2013; Duranti *et al.*, 2012), and of course pedagogy (Caronia, 2012, 2021; Caronia *et al.*, 2021; Vassallo, 2016) have long investigated everyday family life as "a uniquely fertile arena for moral thinking and moral development" (Wainryb & Recchia, 2014: 5). In this rich and interdisciplinary line of inquiry, morality is examined as "a discursive practice, inextricably linked with the social and cultural contexts in which it is produced" (Sterponi, 2014: 136). By resorting to different interactive resources and formats, such as threats and summons (Hepburn & Potter, 2011), requests for account (Sterponi, 2003, 2009), directives (see among others, Kent, 2012; Goodwin & Cekaite, 2012), activity contracts (Aronsson & Cekaite, 2011), and even embodied resources such as gaze and touch (Cekaite, 2010, 2015, 2016), parents signal their children's misbehaviors, making salient culture-specific moral orders and promoting the development of the child's moral agency (Sterponi, 2014). Family activities and the 'small talk' that underpins them are thus conceived as *moral arenas*: by taking part in ordinary conversations, parents and children have the chance to evoke, convey, discuss, and appropriate ethical worldviews made of assumptions, norms, and expectations, thus gradually becoming morally competent members of their communities.

Research on morality in family interaction has focused on a variety of family activities in and through which children are educated "to thinking and feeling in ways that resonate with notions of morality" (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007: 5). These include mealtimes (Ochs *et al.*, 1996; Blum-Kulka, 1997; Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2007; Galatolo & Caronia, 2018; Caronia *et al.*, 2021), sports (Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012; Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007), media-consumption activities (Caronia, 2012), and cleaning practices (Fasulo *et al.*, 2007). However, among the activities that make up the fabric of ordinary family, there is at least one that has been scarcely explored as a morally dense educational arena: homework.

2.1 Homework as a morally dense accomplishment

Like other family activities entailing interactions between parents and children, homework can be considered a moral site, an opportunity for locally (re)affirming and conveying "implicit and explicit messages about right and wrong, better and worse, rules, norms, obligations, duties, etiquette, moral reasoning, virtue, character, and other dimensions on how to lead a moral life" (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007: 5). As stressed by Pontecorvo *et al.* (2013), parent-assisted homework features "a complex hybridization of different practices", promoting both formal and informal learning, and including socialization into culture-specific dimensions like "norms, values, and beliefs enacted within the family" (Pontecorvo *et al.*, 2013: 14). Put another way, in and through the unfolding of homework conversations, children do not merely learn subject-related contents. They are also pervasively educated into the pillars of the "small culture" of the family (Holliday, 1999) as well as the larger cultures of the communities they belong to. Recent research on homework has started illuminating the pervasive process of moral education afforded by parent-child homework interactions. For example, Wingard (2007) and Colla (2020) have illustrated that conversations during and about homework feature references to time, its value, as well as rules for its management, thus constituting a fundamental arena for children's 'temporal socialization' (Elias, 1992; Daly, 1996). Considering homework as a "zone of […] double-belonging" (Marsico, 2013: 367), i.e., a bridge between family and school cultures, Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante (2015) and Colla (2022b) have shown that parent-child homework conversations give parents the chance to make explicit and negotiate moral standards, beliefs, and rules concerning the ways in which homework and school-related activities should be done. By doing homework with their parents, children are thus exposed to 'teacher-like' standards and expectations, gradually learning school-appropriate ways of behaving.

Building on these works, and contributing to the still-underexplored line of inquiry of 'homework-related morality', this article illustrates how this routinary activity is pervaded by parents' and children's moral talk. The analyses below show how moral horizons concerning topics as different as children's duties and autonomy, the imperative of striving for excellence, the existence of social roles and related rights and responsibilities are made relevant, discussed, and conveyed in the unfolding of ordinary parent-child interactions during homework.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this study are drawn from a corpus of 62 video-recorded homework sessions. The 19 families involved in the project lived in two regions in the north of Italy and were composed of two working

parents and at least one child attending primary school (i.e., 6-10 years old). Among the nineteen families involved, three families have a migratory background; in all families, parents and children speak Italian when doing homework. Participants were recruited by the author and their colleagues through their personal and work connections. To reduce the potential impact of the researcher and the video-recording tools, the video-recording process was self-administered by the parents in compliance with the instructions provided by the researcher (e.g., information about when to turn on/off the camera, where to place it etc.). Participants' consent was obtained according to Italian and European laws regulating the handling of personal and sensitive data (i.e., Italian law n. 196/2003 and EU Regulation n. 2016/679). For the sake of anonymity, all names have been fictionalized and references to people and places have been modified or omitted.

Data have been transcribed and analyzed adopting a conversation analysis informed approach (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013; Sacks *et al.*, 1974; for transcript conventions see the Appendix). This methodological approach has been chosen because it allows to identify and analyze the micro and multimodal details of parent-child conversations. Indeed, in line with the phenomenological approach in pedagogy (Bertolini, 1988; Caronia, 2011, 2018, 2020), investigating the situated unfolding of parent-child interactions is viewed here as a way to discover and describe the unnoticed educational events that sprinkle ordinary family life. In line with the multimodal approach to social interaction (Goodwin, 2000), transcripts have been enriched with notations for gaze, gestures, body movements, and orientations to objects when treated as relevant by the participants. The transcripts in this article are presented in two lines: the original Italian transcript is followed by an idiomatic translation in American English.

For the aims of this study, data were first observed on the basis of a broad definition of 'moral talk', i.e., any instance of implicit and explicit conversations about good and bad, right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, values, obligations, prohibitions, general principles, and duties (see Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007). After repeated observation, 58 occurrences of moral talk have been identified. In these conversational sequences, parents visibly assume and evoke in more or less explicit ways a series of moral beliefs, norms, and expectations that concern not only the ongoing activity of homework, but also related issues like learning, schooling, and education, as well as topics that are more distantly related to the specific activity at hand, such as children's duties, the management of time, the notion of autonomy, the existence of social roles and related responsibilities. Illustrating some of these sequences, the analyses presented in the next section show that parent-child homework interactions, despite being characterized by learning-oriented exchanges and practices of formal education, also afford moments of ethical reflexivity (Kremer-Sadlik, 2019; Keane, 2014a, 2014b, 2016) whereby parents and children evoke, co-construct, and educate each other into morally appropriate ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

4. Parent-assisted homework as an arena for moral education

The examples in this section show how everyday homework conversations between parents and children constitute a fertile soil for moral talk. In the unfolding of didactic sequences, in-between school-like activities geared toward producing subject-related learning and formal education (e.g., explanations, tests, and quizzes), parents and children interrupt the accomplishment of the task at hand and indulge in the formulation and discussion of morally relevant topics emerging from the contingencies of the specific interaction. Ex. 1 below perfectly illustrates this phenomenon. It occurs just at the end of a quiz activity whereby the mother has tested Tania's knowledge of the history lesson due the next day. Since Tania has failed to answer most of the quiz questions, the mother instructs her on what to do next (i.e., revising the lesson). What follows is a sequence of moral talk whereby mother and child discuss rights and responsibilities related to different social roles, more specifically those of 'teacher' and 'pupil'.

Ex. 1 – "She's the teacher. She can"
F5H4 (12.20 – 12.55)
Mother; Tania (nine years old, fifth grade)

```
1  Mother   allora secondo me bisogna che lo riguardi eh (.) perché=
            ok, in my opinion you need to look at it again eh (.) because=

2  Tania    =sì   ma  non ci può dare  [all'inizio  della scuola qua-]
            =yes but she can't give us [at the beginning of the school fo-]

3  Mother                              [no    lei     può.]
                                       [no    she     can.]

4           lei può.
            she can.

5  Tania    quattro pagine
            four pages  ((in an irritated tone))

6  Mother   sì te ne può  dare  anche dieci ^perché lei è l'insegnante.
            yes she can even give  you ten   ^because she's the teacher.

7  Tania                                    ^((takes the history book closer and starts reading
           it))

8  Mother   lei può.
            she can.
```

After quizzing Tania on the history lesson and ascertaining her very scarce knowledge of it (not transcribed), the mother instructs the child

on what she should do next, that is revise the lesson (line 1). Clearly enough, with this turn the mother also conveys a negative evaluation of the child's performance in the quiz. However, note that such a negative evaluation is delivered in a very indirect and mitigated way. Indeed, the mother does not explicitly state the negative evaluation; rather, she puts it across by suggesting that the child needs to revise the lesson. The use of a suggestion framed as the mother's personal opinion ("in my opinion", line 1) mitigates the negative evaluation of the child's performance. Furthermore, the mother words the action that Tania should carry out as "looking at [the lesson] again", and not, for example, as 'revising' or 'studying'. By stating that the child needs to merely 'look again' at the lesson, the mother further minimizes the negative evaluation of her performance. With such a mitigated instruction, the mother appears oriented to protecting the child's "face" (Goffman, 1955) while still conveying a negative evaluation of the child's knowledge of the history lesson. In her reply, Tania initially accepts the mother's instruction and implied negative evaluation ("yes", line 2). Yet, immediately after that, she starts complaining about the teacher's homework-related behavior. More specifically, Tania denies the legitimacy of the teacher's homework-related conduct ("she can't give us") in the light of the specific time of the year ("at the beginning of the school", line 2). Interestingly, Tania's complaint constitutes an occurrence of "polyphonic repetition" (Bazzanella, 1993): it resonates with a series of discourses against homework that circulate as 'conversational routines' in the cultural-linguistic community. These discourses evoked by the child argue that homework is a source of stress for children and advocate for its reduction or elimination, especially at specific times such as the beginning/end of the school year and during holidays (Bennet & Kalish, 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000, 2001; Parodi, 2016, 2018). The evoking of these discourses allows Tania to present her claim as a socially shared belief, thus making it more reliable. It is worth pointing out that, by questioning the legitimacy of the teacher's homework-related conduct, Tania does at least two things. First, she claims the right to evaluate and even criticize the teacher's behavior. Second, she implicitly provides a justification for her scarce knowledge of the history lesson. In a few words, Tania attributes to the teacher the responsibility for her own poor performance in the quiz.

The mother rejects Tania's complaint in a totally unmitigated way (lines 3 and 4). Not only does she produce her turn immediately, in interjacent overlapping (Drew, 2009) with Tania, but she also bluntly rejects the child's claim ("no"), and then partially recycles Tania's words in a reversed polarity ("she can. She can.", lines 3 and 4). In this way, the mother displays all her disagreement with the child's claim. With this turn, and especially through the repetition of the concise deontic claims "she can" uttered in a final intonation (lines 3 and 4), the mother discursively constructs the teacher as an unquestionable, almost almighty authority over homework, in clear opposition with Tania's

previous turn. In addition, in rejecting the child's complaint about the teacher's homework-related conduct, the mother attributes to Tania alone the responsibility for her scant knowledge of the history lesson and poor performance in the home quiz.

In replying to her mother, Tania further pursues her complaint trajectory, this time by questioning the legitimacy of the *amount* of homework ("four pages", line 5). Yet, the mother bluntly confirms the teacher's authority ("yes"), then she provides 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). In this way, the mother further presents the teacher as an almighty authority over homework: she can do anything by virtue of her teacher status and the child is not entitled to question her choices. Even after Tania has visibly abandoned the complaint trajectory (she takes the history book and starts revising, line 7), the mother affirms the teacher's authority once again through the repetition of the deontic claim ("she can", line 8).

In sum, this episode shows how the mother interactively constructs the unquestionable authority of the teacher and makes relevant the child's duty to respect such an authority. Underlying this exchange is the assumption, visibly taken for granted and made relevant by the mother, that different social roles (in this case, teacher and pupil) entail different rights, duties, and responsibilities. By taking part in ordinary interactions like this one, children like Tania are socialized into the existence of a culture-specific social hierarchy, they are assigned a place in it, and they are educated to complying with the duties, responsibilities, and moral expectations that it entails. As this example clearly shows, such a morally dense topic emerged in the unfolding of ordinary homework conversations and was triggered by a school-like activity devoted to formal learning like testing (see Caronia *et al.*, in press).

The next excerpt further illustrates how morally dense conversations between parents and children are afforded by an activity intended to promote subject-related learning, in this case homework correction. We join the conversation when the mother is correcting the homework exercises done by the child. This correction activity is deeply informed by teachers' expectations and oriented toward fostering the child's learning of school assessment standards. However, there is more than this formal learning-oriented talk going on. The entire exchange lies on the moral notion of 'virtue' (Lambek, 2010; MacIntyre, 1984), that is the assumption that one should do their best and strive for excellence. Despite not being explicitly stated as such, this moral imperative is taken for granted, made "actionable through talk" (Heritage, 1997: 222), and put into practice by the mother first and then by child as well.

Ex. 2 – "You can color a bit better"
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                                                        ^((turns the page and points to a
               picture))

3    Vale      ihiih[ihihih

4    Mother         [puoi colorare un po' me:glio. mi sbaglio?
                    [you can color a bit be:tter. am I wrong?

5    Vale      ((takes a crayon))

6    Mother    fai a modo.
               do it properly.
```

While correcting the homework exercises done by the child, the mother issues a negative evaluation of the child's coloring ("here, in my opinion, you can color a bit better. Am I wrong?", lines 1 and 4). Similarly to what we have seen in ex. 1, the mother's negative evaluation is very mitigated. Indeed, the mother begins with the positive evaluation of a picture colored by the child ("here you have colored quite well", line 1), then she makes relevant another picture through the deictic "here" uttered in a continuing intonation (line 1). However, before saying anything about it, she frames what she is about to say as her own personal opinion ("in my opinion", line 1). Only after that, the mother finally produces a very mitigated negative evaluation: she affirms the child's ability to slightly improve her work, asking for the child's confirmation ("you can color a bit better. Am I wrong?", line 4). Despite this mitigation, the mother's negative evaluation is morally saturated: by stressing that the child could improve her work by coloring "a bit better", the mother makes relevant the taken-for-granted belief that the child should do her best in completing the assignments. The imperative of striving for excellence, which is at the basis of the notion of virtue, is thus visibly assumed and made "actionable through talk" (Heritage, 1997: 222) by the mother.

Vale immediately complies with this ought-to-be horizon as she displays her intention to start coloring (she takes a crayon, line 5). Before Vale begins, the mother issues a 'morally dense' directive: "do it properly" (line 6). The adverb "properly" encodes all the moral relevance of the mother's intervention: with this directive, the mother communicates that there is a 'proper' way to do homework, a moral standard of 'appropriateness' that the child should meet when doing homework. The right way of behaving when doing school-related activities like homework entails improving the work and striving to do one's own best.

The development of the exchange shows how the child herself orients to the moral imperative of striving for excellence and puts into practice.

14 seconds omitted: Vale colors the picture requested by the mother

```
7

8    Vale      ((takes another crayon and starts coloring another picture))

9    Mother    quello va già bene
               that one is already ok

10   Vale      no no meglio
               no no better ((coloring))

11   Mother    ((smiles))
```

After coloring the picture requested by the mother (line 7), Vale takes another crayon thus displaying her intention to color another picture (line 8). At this point, the mother communicates that there is no need to color that picture since it is "already ok" (line 9). However, Vale expresses her disagreement with the mother's assessment by saying that it can be improved ("no no better", line 10) and concurrently starts coloring. This brief exchange demonstrates the child's orientation to the moral imperative previously evoked by the mother: Vale is not satisfied with her homework being "ok" and works to make it "better". In so doing, the child demonstrates she has been socialized into pursuing virtue (i.e., striving for excellence) in doing homework. By replying with a smile (line 11), the mother treats the child's conduct as morally appropriate and therefore ratifies the assumption upon which it is based: the child must strive for excellence when doing the assignments. Similarly to ex. 1, this excerpt shows that parent-child conversations centered on homework exercises and intended to foster children's formal learning are in fact sprinkled with moral messages that educate children into culture-specific ethical horizons.

The ethical density of homework dialogues and their constitutive role in the process whereby children become morally competent subjects is further exemplified in the following excerpt. Here, mother and child are doing a math assignment together, which consists of a series of calculations. Since neither the child nor the mother know how to do it, the mother looks at the calculations that the child did earlier that afternoon, without the mother. When the mother sees that these calculations are correct, she asks the child how she did them. This question originates a long sequence where the child's conduct is treated as an object of moral assessment and the ethically dense notions of 'cheating' and 'autonomy' are discussed by all family members and given a situated meaning.

Ex. 3 – "Then it's cheating"
F8H3 v. 2 (06.20 – 06.50)
Mother; Father; Carolina (eight years old, third grade)

```
1    Mother      come le hai fatte?
                 how did you do them?

2    Carolina    eh:: ((looking at the subtractions))

3    Mother      le hai ↑COPIATE?
                 did you ↑COPY them from someone else?

4    Carolina    no:↓:: ((looking at the mother))

5                l'inizio l'ho fatto i:o=
                 the beginning I did myse:lf=

6    Mother      =l'inizio, e la fine?
                 =the beginning, and the end?

7    Carolina    °mi ha aiutato un po' la Sara°
                 °Sara helped me a bit° ((laughing))

8    Mother      ah sì? ah:::: ecco dicevo che brava
                 oh really? oh:::: that's why I was saying to myself how well
                 ((smiling))

9                le ha fatte tutte bene  oggi [quelle lì
                 she* did them all well today [those there ((smiling))

10   Father                                   [allora c'è l'imbroglio
                                              [then it's cheating ((smiling))

11   Mother      c'è l'imbroglio
                 it's cheating ((laughing))
```

*She = Carolina

Having seen the calculations that Carolina did correctly earlier that afternoon (not transcribed), the mother asks the child how she did them (line 1). After the child's failure to provide an answer (line 2), the mother asks whether she copied them ("did you COPY them from someone else?", line 3). By emphasizing the word "copy" (see the higher volume and pitch), the mother conveys the problematic nature of this action. The belief that copying is a morally inappropriate practice is also displayed by Carolina who straightforwardly rejects the mother's hypothesis through a prolonged, prosodically marked occurrence of the token "no" (line 4). After that, Carolina specifies that she did the beginning of the calculations (line 5). Pressed by the mother's further question (line 6), Carolina finally admits that Sara (i.e., a family friend) helped her "a bit". Note that, in reporting that she received help from a family friend, Carolina demonstrates in various ways her orientation to the problematic nature of this conduct. First, she maximizes her own contribution to homework ("the beginning I did myself", line 5); second, she does not reveal that she was helped until explicitly asked by the mother. When she finally admits that she received

help, Carolina minimizes the support provided by Sara ("Sara helped me *a bit*", line 7) and accompanies this disclosure with a light laughter, which marks her turn as delicate, awkward talk (Haakana, 2001). With these turns (lines 5 and 7), Carolina displays and "talks into being" (Heritage, 1984a: 290) the belief that homework should be done autonomously, with no help, as well as the idea that her conduct is problematic from a moral point of view.

The mother welcomes the information provided by Carolina with surprise (see the request for confirmation "oh really?" with the prolonged change of state token in line 8; Heritage, 1984b) while displaying affiliation with the child through the smiling voice (Haakana, 2010). After the mother acknowledges that Sara is responsible for Carolina's good math performance (lines 8 and 9), the father intervenes by describing the child's conduct as "cheating" (line 10). This definition of the child's conduct is ratified by the mother who repeats it in laughter ("it's cheating", line 11). Even though both the father's and the mother's claims are accompanied by laughter (lines 10 and 11), the Italian word "*imbroglio*" ("cheating") characterizes Carolina's behavior in a morally dense and strongly negative way. Receiving help and failing to be autonomous in doing homework is thus unanimously treated by the parents (as well as by the child herself first) as a problematic and deeply immoral behavior. This mundane, contingent exchange occurring while mother and child are doing the math assignment is extremely rich from a moral point of view. In this conversation, Carolina, her mother, and her father momentarily suspend the ongoing accomplishment of the calculations to evaluate the child's conduct and negotiate the appropriateness of actions like 'copying', 'cheating', and 'receiving help'. Furthermore, against the backdrop of this morally dense conversation, mother, father, and child indirectly affirm the value of autonomy in doing homework. Even though it is never explicitly stated as such, the imperative of 'doing homework autonomously' is the foundation of this exchange, and it is tacitly reaffirmed and conveyed as an unquestionable moral principle.

5. Concluding discussion

Through a detailed analysis of the turn-by-turn unfolding of parent-child interactions, this study has illustrated that parent-assisted homework is far more than a learning-oriented activity whereby children acquire subject-related knowledge and develop academic skills. This routinary activity constitutes an ethically dense accomplishment, an arena where parents and children evoke, discuss, or even tacitly convey culture-specific moral assumptions. Indeed, as the analyses have shown, homework is sprinkled with moments of ethical reflexivity (Kremer-Sadlik, 2019; Keane, 2014a, 2014b, 2016) during which family members suspend the ongoing formal-learning tasks they are involved in to indulge in morally dense discourses. While

doing homework with their parents, children have the chance to listen to, discuss, and appropriate moral ideologies concerning topics as diverse as the existence of social roles and related duties, rights, and responsibilities (ex. 1), the notion of virtue (ex. 2), the value of autonomy (ex. 3), as well as related moral imperatives such as avoiding complaining (ex. 1), doing one's best (ex. 2), and avoiding copying and cheating (ex. 3). As this article has illustrated, these ethically dense topics emerge and are dealt with in the unfolding of ordinary, learning-oriented activities like repeating the history lesson or doing math calculations. In this perspective, parent-assisted homework can be defined as a *hybrid learning activity* (Pontecorvo *et al.*, 2013), an interactive achievement whereby children are apprenticed into a wide range of beliefs, notions, rules, and expectations. By participating in parent-assisted homework interactions, children do not merely learn subject-related topics (e.g., the history lesson) and the procedures for completing the assigned tasks (e.g., how to color pictures or how to do math calculations). They also acquire the much more foundational and overarching *moral knowledge* that structures their ways of being in the world and making sense of it. In a nutshell, and similarly to other mundane family activities (e.g., mealtimes, see Galatolo & Caronia, 2018; Caronia *et al.*, 2021; Vassallo, 2016), homework constitutes a privileged site for *moral education*, an activity whereby children are apprenticed into 'right' ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

In showing that and how a school-related, formal learning activity like homework is imbued with moral messages that socialize children into culturally competent social actors, this article demonstrates that practices of formal and informal education coexist and co-constitute each other. As argued by diverse scholars who intervened in the long-standing Italian debate on the relationship between 'socialization' and 'instruction', a neat separation between formal and informal learning, intentional and unintentional education, socialization and instruction, although useful from a theoretical point of view, is not possible in concrete practice, because any instructional activity, no matter how formal, intentional, and oriented to producing subject-related learning, inevitably implies and contributes to transmitting a series of cultural and deeply moral meanings (Bertolini, 1988; Massa, 1997).

By empirically illustrating to what extent parent-assisted homework is pervaded by moral talk and events of moral education, this work constitutes a valuable resource to foster educators', particularly parents', reflexivity and "epistemic vigilance" about their own mundane – and largely unnoticed – educational praxis (Caronia, 2020: 60). Indeed, this work sheds light on the huge and pervasive moral work that parents and caregivers carry out in the unfolding of everyday life. When talking with children during everyday activities, even when deeply involved in apparently mere 'academic', 'subject-related' talk, parents frequently create spaces of informal education (Tramma, 2009). By delving into conversational excursus whereby moral values and assumptions are made relevant, parents

convey such ethical systems, raising their children into morally competent beings. Shedding light on the ordinary yet deeply moral conversations that uphold mundane experiences, this article promotes parents' awareness of the educational density of everyday family activities, fostering their ability to see, critically evaluate, and (re)orient their ordinary practices of moral education. Last but not least, the present study offers relevant insights for teachers' praxis and training. By unveiling the concrete and mundane ways in which homework unfolds as an ordinary family activity, and showing to what extent this activity promotes practices of informal, moral education, this study can contribute to raising teachers' awareness of the educational import of an ordinary, often taken-for-granted, and even 'unseen' activity like homework.

Appendix

°word°	talk that is markedly quieter than the rest of the talk
WORD	talk that is markedly louder than the rest of the talk
[word]	overlapping talk
(.)	pause shorter than 0.2 seconds
(1.5)	pause measured in seconds and tenths of a second
=	absence of any discernable silence between two turns
–	prior word or sound is cut off
((word))	description of nonverbal events (e.g., gestures, gaze direction)
wo:rd	prolongation of the sound
,	slightly rising intonation
?	strongly rising intonation (typical of questions)
.	falling intonation
↑	higher pitch
↓	lower pitch
^	moment when nonverbal event begins with respect to uttered words
*	translator's notes

Bibliography

Aronsson, K. & Cekaite, A. (2011), "Activity contracts and directives in everyday family politics", in *Discourse & Society,* vol. 22, n. 2, pp. 137-154.

Bazzanella, C. (1993), "Dialogic Repetition", in H. Löffler, C. Grolimund & M. Gyger (eds.), *Dyaloganalyse IV*, Tubingen: Max Niemayer, pp. 185-294.

Bennet, S. & Kalish, N. (2006), *The case against homework: How homework is hurting our children and what we can do about it*, New York: Crown.

Bertolini, P. (1988), *L'esistere pedagogico. Ragioni e limiti di una pedagogia come scienza fenomenologicamente fondata*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia.

Blackmore, J. & Hutchinson, K. (2010), "Ambivalent Relations: The 'Tricky Footwork' of Parental Involvement in School Communities", in *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, vol. 14, n. 5, pp. 499-515.

Blum-Kulka, S. (1997), *Dinner Talk. Cultural Patterns of Sociability and Socialization in Family Discourse*, New York: Routledge.

Bolognesi, I. & Dalledonne Vandini, C. (2020), "Fare i compiti a casa. Uno studio etnografico di un'attività quotidiana svolta in famiglia", in *Rivista Italiana di Educazione Familiare*, vol. 16, pp. 157-177.

Bolognesi, I. & Dalledonne Vandini, C. (2021), "La Correction des Devoirs à la Maison: Une Recherche Ethnographique avec des Mères et des Enfants en Italie", in *La Revue Internationale de l'Education Familiale*, vol. 49, pp. 201-221.

Booth, A. & Dunn, J.F. (eds.) (1996), *Family-school Links. How Do They Affect Educational Outcomes?*, New York and London: Routledge.

Caronia, L. (2011), *Fenomenologia dell'educazione. Intenzionalità, cultura e conoscenza in pedagogia*, Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Caronia, L. (2012), "Texts-in-dialogue. The communicative constitution of media ideologies through family ordinary talk", in *Language and Dialogue*, vol. 2, n. 3, pp. 427-448.

Caronia, L. (ed.) (2021), *Language and interaction at home and school*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Caronia, L. (2018), "The phenomenological turn in education: the legacy of Piero Bertolini's theory", in *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica/Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, vol. 13, n. 2, pp. 1-22.

Caronia, L. (2020), "Pedagogia della vita quotidiana. Ovvero: come costruiamo i mondi a cui apparteniamo", in D. Bruzzone & E. Musi, *Aver cura dell'esistenza. Studi in onore di Vanna Iori*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, pp. 53-62.

Caronia, L., Colla, V. & Galatolo, R. (2021), "Making unquestionable worlds: Morality building practices in family dinner dialogues", in L. Caronia (ed.), *Language and interaction at home and school*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 87-120.

Caronia, L., Colla, V. & Bolognesi, I. (2023), "When school language and culture enter the home: testing children as a 'school-aligned' parental activity", in *Civitas Educationis Education, Politics, and Culture*, vol. 12, n. 1, pp. 157-177.

Caronia, L. & Dalledonne Vandini, C. (2019), "Assessing a (gifted) Child in Parent-Teacher Conference: Participants' Resources to Pursue (and Resist) a No-Problem Trajectory", in *Language & Dialogue*, vol. 9, pp. 125-148.

Cekaite, A. (2010), "Shepherding the child: embodied directive sequences in parent–child interactions", in *Text & Talk*, vol. 30, n. 1, pp. 1-25.

Cekaite, A. (2015), "The coordination of talk and touch in adults' directives to children: touch and social control", in *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, vol. 48, n. 2, pp. 152-175.

Cekaite, A. (2016), "Touch as social control: Haptic organization of attention in adult–child interactions", in *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 92, pp. 30-42.

Colla, V. (2020), ""You should have done it earlier": The morality of time management in parent-child homework interactions", in *Civitas Educationis. Education, Politics, and Culture*, vol. 9 n. 2, pp. 103-120.

Colla, V. (2022a), *Children's socialization, involved parenting, and the construction of the family-school partnership in everyday family interactions: a study on parent-assisted homework as a morally dense educational arena*. Doctoral thesis, University of Bologna, Bologna.

Colla, V. (2022b), ""Don't complain and do it properly": 'Pedagogicalized parents' and the morality of doing homework", in *Rivista Italiana di Educazione Familiare*, vol. 20, n. 1, pp. 211-228.

Colla, V. (2023), "Doing being an involved parent". Practices for building the family-school partnership in parent-child homework dialogues", in *Language and Dialogue*, vol. 13, n. 2, pp. 283-305.

Contini, M. (a cura di) (2012), *Dis-alleanze nei contesti educativi*, Roma: Carocci.

Cunha, J., Rosário, P., Macedo, L., Nunes, A.R., Fuentes, S., Pinto, R. & Suárez, N. (2015), "Parents' conceptions of their homework involvement in elementary school", in *Psicothema*, vol. 27, n. 2, pp. 159-165.

Daly, K.J. (1996), *Families & Time. Keeping Pace in a Hurried Culture*, London: Sage.

Di Cristofaro, C. (2018), "Fare i compiti è diventato un compito da genitori?" *Il Sole 24 Ore*. May 7, 2018. https://alleyoop.ilsole24ore.com/2018/05/17/fare-i-compiti-e-diventato-un-compito-da-genitori/, access on April 11, 2021.

Drew, P. (2009), ""Quit talking while I'm interrupting": A comparison between positions of overlap onset in conversation", in M. Haakana, M. Laakso & J. Lindström (eds.), *Talk in Interaction: Comparative Dimensions*, Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society (SKS), pp. 70-93.

Duranti, A., Ochs, E. & Schieffelin, B.B. (eds.) (2012), *Handbook of Language Socialization*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Elias, N. (1992), *Time: An Essay*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Epstein, J.L. (1990), "School and family connections: Theory research and implications for integrating sociologies of education and family", in D.G. Unger & M.B. Sussman (eds.), *Families in community settings: Interdisciplinary perspectives*, New York, NY: Haworth Press, pp. 99-126.

Epstein, J.L. (1995), "School/Family/Community Partnerships. Caring for the Children We Share", in *Phi Delta Kappan,* vol. 76, n. 9, pp. 701-712.

Epstein, J.L. (2001), *School, Family and Community Partnerships. Preparing educators and improving schools*, Boulder (CO): Westview Press.

Fasulo, A. & Pontecorvo, C. (1999), *Come si dice? Linguaggio e apprendimento in famiglia e a scuola*, Roma: Carocci.

Fasulo, A., Loyd, H. & Padiglione, V. (2007), "Children's Socialization into Cleaning Practices: A Cross-Cultural Perspective", in *Discourse and Society,* vol. 18, n. 1, pp. 11-33.

Forsberg, L. (2009), *Involved Parenthood. Everyday Lives of Swedish Middle-Class Families*, Doctoral thesis, Linköping University, Linköping.

Galatolo, R. & Caronia, L. (2018), "Morality at Dinnertime: The sense of the Other as a Practical Accomplishment in Family Interaction", in *Discourse and Society*, vol. 29, n. 1, pp. 43-62.

Gigli, A. (2016), *Famiglie Evolute. Capire e Sostenere le Funzioni Educative delle Famiglie Plurali*, Parma: Edizioni Junior.

Goffman, E. (1955), "On face-work: an analysis of ritual elements in social interaction", in *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes,* vol. 18, pp. 213-231.

Goodwin, C. (2000), "Action and Embodiment within Situated Human Interaction", in *Journal of Pragmatics,* vol. 32, pp. 1489-1522.

Goodwin, C. & Cekaite, A. (2012), "Calibration in Directive-response Sequences in Family Interaction", in *Journal of Pragmatics,* vol. 46, pp. 122-138.

Gottzén, L. (2011), "Involved fatherhood? Exploring the educational work of middle-class men", in *Gender and Education*, vol. 23, n. 5, pp. 619-634.

Gottzén, L. & Kremer-Sadlik, T. (2012), "Fatherhood and Youth Sports: A Balancing Act between Care and Expectations", in *Gender & Society,* vol. 26, n. 4, pp. 639-664.

Haakana, M. (2001), "Laughter as a patient's resource: Dealing with delicate aspects of medical interaction", in *Text & Talk*, vol. 21, no. 1-2, pp. 187-219.

Haakana, M. (2010), "Laughter and Smiling: Notes on Co-occurrences", in *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 42, pp. 1499-1512.

Henderson, A.T. & Berla, N. (1994), *The family is critical to student achievement*, Washington, DC: National Committee for Citizens in Education.

Hepburn, A. & Potter, J. (2011), "Threats: Power, family mealtimes, and social influence", in *British Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 50, n. 1, pp. 99-120.

Heritage, J. (1997), "Conversation Analysis and Institutional Talk: Analyzing Data", in D. Silverman (ed.), *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, London: Sage Publications, pp. 222-245.

Heritage, J. (1984a), *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Heritage, J. (1984b), "A change-of-state token and aspects of its sequential placement", in M. Atkinson & J. Heritage, *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, pp. 299-345.

Holliday, A. (1999), "Small Cultures", in *Applied Linguistics,* vol. 20, n. 2, pp. 237-264.

Hoover-Dempsey, K.V., Battiato, A.C., Walker, J.M.T., Reed, R.P., DeJong, J.M. & Jones, K.P. (2001), "Parental Involvement in Homework", in *Educational Psychologist*, vol. 36, n. 3, pp. 195-209.

Izquierdo, C., Kremer-Sadlik, T., Fatigante, M., Arcidiacono, F., Gutiérrez, K. & Pontecorvo, C. (2006), "Working Familes' Engagement in Children's Activities: Views from Italian and American Families", in *Working Paper No. 62*.

Keane, W. (2014a), "Freedom, Reflexivity, and the Sheer Everydayness of Ethics", in *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 4, n. 1, pp. 443-457.

Keane, W. (2014b), "Affordance and Reflexivity in Ethical Life: An Ethnographic Stance", in *Anthropological Theory*, vol. 14, n. 1, pp. 3-26.

Keane, W. (2016), *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kent, A. (2012), "Compliance, Resistance and Incipient Compliance when Responding to Directives", in *Discourse & Society,* vol. 14, n. 6, pp. 711-730.

Kralovec, E. & Buell, J. (2000), *The end of homework: How homework disrupts families, overburdens children, and limits learning*, Boston: Beacon.

Kralovec, E. & Buell, J. (2001), "End Homework Now", in *Educational Leadership*, vol. 58, n. 7, pp. 39-42.

Kremer-Sadlik, T. (2019), "Ordinary Ethics and Reflexivity in Mundane Family Interactions", in *Ethos,* vol. 47, n. 2, pp. 190-210.

Kremer-Sadlik, T. & Kim, J.L. (2007), "Lessons from Sports: Children's Socialization to Values through Family Interaction during Sports Activities", in *Discourse & Society*, vol. 18, n. 1, pp. 35-52.

Kremer-Sadlik, T. & Fatigante, M. (2015), "Investing in children's future: Cross-cultural perspectives and ideologies on parental involvement in education", in *Childhood,* vol. 22, n. 1, pp. 67-84.

Lambek, M. (2010), *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*, New York: Fordham University Press.

MacIntyre, A. (1984), *After Virtue*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Marsico, G. (2013), "General conclusions: Moving between the social spaces: Conditions for boundaries crossing", in G. Marsico, K. Komatsu & A. Iannaccone (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: Intercontextual Dynamics Between Family and School*, Charlotte, NC: IAP, pp. 361-374.

Massa, R. (1997), *Cambiare la scuola. Educare o istruire?* Bari: Laterza.

Meirieu, P. (2002[2000]), *I compiti a casa. Genitori, figli, insegnanti: a ciascuno il suo ruolo*, Milano: Feltrinelli.

Montalbetti, K. & Lisimberti, C. (2020), "Dal confine alla soglia. I compiti a casa tra scuola e famiglia", in *Pedagogia Oggi*, vol. 1, pp. 309-322.

Ochs, E., Pontecorvo, C. & Fasulo, A. (1996), "Socializing Taste", in *Ethnos*, vol. 61, pp. 7-46.

Ochs, E. & Kremer-Sadlik, T. (2007), "Introduction: Morality as a Family Practice", in *Discourse and Society*, vol. 18, n. 1, pp. 5-10.

Ochs, E. & Kremer-Sadlik, T. (eds.) (2013), *Fast-Forward Family: Home, Work, and Relationships in Middle-Class America,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Parodi, M. (2016), *Basta compiti! Non è così che si impara*, Milano: Sonda.

Parodi, M. (2018), *Così impari: per una scuola senza compiti*, Roma: Castelvecchi editore.

Pontecorvo, C. & Arcidiacono, F. (2007), *Famiglie all'Italiana. Parlare a Tavola,* Milano: Raffaello Cortina.

Pontecorvo, C., Liberati, V. & Monaco, C. (2013), "How school enters family everyday life", in G. Marsico, K. Komatsu & A. Iannaccone (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries. Intercontextual Dyamics between Family and School*, Charlotte, NC: IAP, pp. 3-34.

Popkewitz, T.S. (2003), "Governing the child and Pedagogicalization of the Parent. A Historical Excursus into the Present", in M.N. Bloch, K. Holmlund, I. Moqvist & T.S. Popkewitz (eds.), *Governing Children, Families, and Education*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 35-61.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E.A. & Jefferson, G. (1974), "A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation", in *Language*, vol. 50, n. 4, pp. 696-735.

Sidnell, J. & Stivers, T. (eds.) (2013), *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis*, Oxford, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell.

Sterponi, L. (2003), "Account Episodes in Family Discourse: The making of morality in everyday interaction", in *Discourse Studies*, vol. 5, n. 1, pp. 79-100.

Sterponi, L. (2009), "Accountability in Family Discourse: Socialization into Norms and Standards and Negotiation of Responsibility in Italian Dinner Conversation", in *Childhood*, vol. 16, n. 4, pp. 441-459.

Sterponi, L. (2014), "Caught red-handed: How Italian Parents Engage Children in Moral Discourse and Action", in C. Wainryb & H.E. Recchia (eds.), *Talking about right and wrong: Parent-child conversations as contexts for moral development*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 122-143.

Wainryb, C. & Recchia, H.E. (eds.) (2014), *Talking about Right and Wrong: Parent-Child Conversations as Contexts for Moral Development*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wingard, L. (2007), "Constructing time and prioritizing activities in parent-child interaction", in *Discourse & Society*, vol. 18, n. 1, pp. 75-91.

Tramma, S. (2009), *Che cos'è l'educazione informale*, Roma: Carocci.

Vassallo, E. (2016), *Culture familiari e pratiche di vita quotidiana. Modelli educativi e culturali nelle conversazioni a tavola tra genitori e figli*, PhD disseration, University of Bologna, Bologna.

Walker, J.M.T., Hoover-Dempsey, K.V., Whetsel, D.R. & Green, LC. (2004), *Parental Involvement in Homework. A Review of Current Research and its Implications for Teachers, After School Program Staff, and Parents Leaders*. Harvard Family Research Project.

Weininger, E.B. & Lareau, A. (2003), "Translating Bourdieu into the American Context: the Question of Social Class and Family-school Relations", in *Poetics*, vol. 31, pp. 375-402.