



Parent–teacher conferences in Dutch culturally diverse schools: Participation and conflict in institutional context



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ABSTRACT

In The Netherlands, the transition from primary to secondary education is prepared by formal talks between teachers and parents. The purpose of these conferences is to discuss the child's score on the national CITO test and the teacher's recommendation for the child's track in secondary school. We recorded, transcribed and analyzed 33 conferences at two multi-ethnic primary schools. Participation with migrant parents was often hampered by their insufficient skills in the Dutch language. In 14 conferences, disagreements occurred about the recommended level for the child or the teacher's characterization of the child. Dutch parents and migrant parents with a high level of education succeeded in solving the disagreement by making compromises with the teacher. Other migrant parents had to accept the teacher's conditions or acquiesce in the teacher's point of view. The conflicts unveiled differences in educational ideas and in views about the responsibilities of the school and the parents. It is proposed that the differences between teacher and parent cannot be explained solely by referring to pre-given cultural positions and practices. We interpret the conferences as an institutional context in which participants strategically shape their contributions, in some conferences to avoid conflict, in others to emphasize differences.

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1. Introduction

This study adds to the growing research on the involvement of parents with a migration background in schools (Crozier & Reay, 2005; Dantas & Manyak, 2010; Kim, 2009; Levine-Rasky, 2009). We analyze the conferences between teachers and parents in culturally diverse schools in The Netherlands at a decisive moment in the pupils' school career. At the end of primary education, parents and teachers engage in a series of talks, in which they discuss the child's transition to secondary education. These conferences have a formal character, because the teacher gives an official recommendation, the "school advice". They are a source of concern and sometimes conflict, in particular when the teacher's advice is for a lower track of secondary education than the parents had imagined or expected.

Contacts between school and home about children from families with a migration background have been reported to be difficult because of parents' putative or real lack of knowledge of the school and the conventions of the educational system. Research on teachers' views on ethnic minority parents' involvement in schools shows that teachers often find these parents less involved than they think they should be and less involved than native parents. In these cases, they regard the poor participation as showing a lack of interest (Kim, 2009; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Other studies reveal that ethnic minority parents find the school difficult to approach and think that their view on their child is not taken seriously (Archer & Francis, 2007; Crozier, 2005; Huss-Keeler, 1997).

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1.1. Context of the study

Our research concerns a particular type of institutional talk at the end of primary school in The Netherlands, when children are twelve years of age, and when they are about to leave primary school and proceed to secondary school. The primary school and the secondary school are two separate systems in The Netherlands. The transition from the one to the other entails a series of institutional activities and talks. Secondary education in The Netherlands consists of a tracked system, too complicated to explain here in detail, but with globally three levels: a level of general education as a preparation for university, a level of general education as a basis for professional education, and a level of vocational education with a more general and a more practical path. Children and their parents are not free to choose any one of these levels; they have to apply for admission to a secondary school that may offer one or more of the secondary tracks. In deciding about admission, a secondary school considers two pieces of information: the child's score on the National Test (the CITO test), and the advice of the teacher of the primary school that the child is leaving.

Halfway through the last year at primary school, in the eighth grade of the Dutch system of primary education (children are twelve years of age), children, at most schools, take the CITO test. The CITO test examines math, reading and study skills, and expresses the child's performance in a general score. The CITO score and the teacher's advice are made known to the parents in a series of formal talks: in the first talk the CITO score and the provisional school advice are divulged. In a second talk, the final advice is presented and written down on a form which the school sends to the secondary school of the child's choice. This form includes a series of questions about the intellectual and social-emotional characteristics of the child. The current study deals with the second talks. The teacher's advice and their characterization of the pupil on the form are to a certain extent negotiable. The talks are therefore considered extremely important by parents; they know that the teacher is the gatekeeper to secondary education for their child.

On average, children from migrant families achieve less well than native Dutch children on the CITO test (Herweijer, 2009). Children of the four main ethnic minority groups in The Netherlands (Moroccan, Turkish, Surinamese and Antillean), compared to native Dutch children, receive more often an advice for the vocational track. For example, in Amsterdam in 2006 65% of children from the four minorities were referred to the lowest track in contrast to 27% of native Dutch children (Babeliowsky & Den Boer, 2007). Many migrant parents see education as the main vehicle for social success for their children, and they are sometimes disappointed when they hear the advice; moreover, they differ more often with teachers about the advice than native Dutch parents (Driessen et al., 2005; Jol & Traag, 2001). Teachers find this difficult to deal with. They ascribe these parents' disappointment to unrealistic aspirations for their children and insufficient knowledge of the Dutch educational system (Driessen et al., 2005).

1.2. Theories of intercultural disagreement

For explaining misunderstandings and conflicts between teachers and migrant parents, some authors have applied an approach based on a cultural difference theory. The assumption of this theory is that, in encounters of people with different cultural backgrounds, misunderstandings and dissimilar interpretations easily occur because of differences in cultural expectations and knowledge. Sometimes, these differences are considered to be connected with broad cultural orientations, often expressed as dichotomies, such as collectivism/individualism. One example of this type of research is a study by Greenfield, Quiroz, and Raeff (2000) of 9 parent-teacher conferences at a primary school in the US, involving Latino immigrant parents. Greenfield et al. interpret the conflicts in these conferences as having to do with parents' and teachers' disagreement of developmental goals, which the authors link to the collectivist culture of the parents and the individualistic culture of the teachers.

A cultural difference approach has been criticized because it easily leads to a deterministic perspective that sees culture as static and unchangeable (De Haan & Elbers, 2005; Elbers, 2010). It brings the risk of ignoring the complexity and contextual variation in people's reactions. Pointing out the agency of the participants in dialogues, we earlier have defended a cultural production perspective (De Haan & Elbers, 2005) and stressed the dialogical and transformative nature of cultural diversity (De Haan, Elbers, & Wissink, 2012; see also Avruch, 2003; Mannheim & Tedlock, 1995). Building on this earlier work we see culture as dynamic, and as continuously being reshaped in interactions and confrontations between members of social groups. Participants produce diversity locally, borrowing from cultural orientations that exist 'outside' the dialogue, but also transforming these orientations while reacting to the demands and actions within a dialogue. An example of such a perspective is a study by Davidson (1996), who, in her analysis of classroom cultures in schools, argues that the academic identities that students bring into the classroom are reworked in processes of collusion and conflict as students react to the institutional context. Interactions in institutional settings are asymmetrical: the interlocutors have different roles and power; they possess unequal access to resources and information (Dahlstedt, 2009; Drew & Heritage, 1992a). Studies of interaction between professionals and lay people, such as between doctor and patient or between social worker and client, illustrate that the partners in the talks have unequal rights to introduce and change topics and to make decisions (Drew & Heritage, 1992b; Lunneblad & Johansson, 2012). The procedure for the Dutch teacher-parent conferences places the parents in a subordinate position: the rules and conditions have been prescribed by the school. Conflicts, therefore, have also to be seen in the context of the roles and power differences in the institutional context (Kakavá, 2001; Levinson, 1992).

In line with the Communication Accommodation Theory (Jones, Gallois, Callan, & Barker, 1999), we depart from the idea that participants in a conversation who consider each other as different need to establish common ground. However, contrary to the idea that cultural differences influence the conversation from the outside, as some studies in this tradition assume, we suggest that difference is thematized or, alternatively, purposively neglected by the interlocutors. The partners in a conversation use interactional strategies to move closer to each other, or to do the reverse and emphasize interpersonal or cultural differences (De

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