



Narrative constructions of school-oriented parenthood during parent–teacher-conferences



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ABSTRACT

This article deals with parent–teacher-conferences in German elementary and secondary schools. Drawing on the frameworks of ethnomethodology and interactional sociolinguistics, it investigates narrative fragments that teachers and parents employ to characterize and assess children and to present themselves in school-oriented identities. Fragmentary stories represent a highly functional communicative means of doing so: They re-stage children's behavior and learning situations and allow parents to portray themselves as urging, correcting and supporting. In jointly developing a mildly critical view on the child, parents and teachers co-construct common ground regarding the norms for objectively assessing the child and his/her achievements and educational perspectives. However, analyses brought to light differences in the degree of common ground established by teachers and parents in terms of the perspectivation of the child as an achiever and the parents as critical and benevolent supporters.

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Introduction

The article deals with parent–teacher-conferences in German elementary and secondary schools. Drawing on the framework of ethnomethodology and interactional sociolinguistics, it investigates “narrative fragments” (Birkner, 2013) or “small stories” (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012, 115) that parents and teachers employ to assess and characterize children. These fragments serve as vehicles for teachers and parents to present themselves as agents of the two institutions: school and home. Analyses reveal how – in the sequential unfolding of actual interactions–parenting is made “a work process articulated to the work process of schooling” (Baker & Keogh, 1997, 264) and how both sides display an achievement-oriented habitus. The findings of this study point to the necessity of regarding parental narratives about their children in school conferences as a specific type of academic discourse practice. It suggests that it is not just children whose academic discourse skills play a role in decisions about their educational careers but also their parents' discursive practices in conferences with the “gatekeepers”. Thus far, we still cannot say how a pupil's academic success is related to her/his parents self-presentations at school. That should not prevent us from examining social differences in the parents' habitual communicative repertoires (see editors' introduction, 2015). Heller and Morek point to the “cultural capital”, in Bourdieu's terms which consists in an “affinity” to the norms, language and discourse practices of the school (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

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Students' careers and social backgrounds

In Germany, children usually first attend a primary school (Grundschule) for four years. In the last year, a decision is made as to what type of school they will attend in the tripartite German school system: they can either attend a Hauptschule (lower secondary school, grades 5–9), Realschule (middle school, grades 5–10), or Gymnasium (grammar school, grades 5–12/13). At a lower secondary school, students receive the same basic education as students attending the other secondary schools, but at a slower pace and with “hands-on” experience. This usually leads to vocational training. A middle school leads to full time or part-time vocational training, but it is possible for high achieving students to switch to a “Gymnasium” after completing grade 10. Graduation from grammar school is the usual way to university. Nearly 40% of all pupils in Germany attend this type of school. Apart from these three secondary school types, each state has a range of special schools designed to meet a variety of special needs.

While today parents are free to choose the type of school the child will attend, at the time of the recordings teachers were responsible for making that decision. They formulated “binding recommendations”. In Germany, social background seems to strongly influence parental hopes and wishes for their offspring. From a quantitative perspective, [Maaz, Trautwein, & Baeriswyl \(2011\)](#) find that achievement, school grades and also advancement perspectives depend on social background. Also, in their longitudinal study of Bavarian primary schools, [Ditton & Kruesken \(2006\)](#) point out that pedagogical recommendations, parents' educational aspirations and the achievements of pupils at school vary in relation to the family's social background. For instance, middle-class parents usually send their children to the prestigious “Gymnasium” even if their performance is poor. Lower-class parents often decide against this, even if their child has demonstrated the necessary ability.

Interestingly, [Ditton \(1992\)](#) emphasizes that not only parents in their educational aspirations, but also teachers in their recommendations anticipate the greater resources that the upper classes can mobilize in order to ensure educational success. This points to the potential relevance of school conferences as an arena of face-to-face contact between teachers and parents: how parents construct their family as a support system and how they position themselves in relation to school expectations ([Kramer & Helsper, 2000](#)) may serve as a basis for teachers to form assumptions about the individual pupil's resources with regard to their familial educational support.

Parent–teacher conferences and sorting practices

One key feature characteristic of institutional encounters is always a particular inferential framework. In many encounters in the school context the framework is that of assessment. Ethnographically oriented studies have shown that sorting pupils in terms of their prospective educational career can be viewed as a practical achievement brought about in and through discourse (cf. [Cedersund & Svensson, 1996](#); [Mazeland & Berenst, 2008](#); [Mehan, 1991](#)).

[Mehan \(1991, 1996\)](#) has shown how the classification and sorting of pupils occurs in and around the school. By looking at the language of educators as they engage in sorting students, [Mehan \(1991\)](#) demonstrates the situated relevance of social structures in the categorical statements made about students' (dis)abilities. In school conferences, institutional officials such as school psychologists ground their categorization of students as having a “learning disability” in a technical vocabulary to which more authority is assigned than to the parents' everyday language. In a similar vein, [Cedersund and Svensson \(1996, 133\)](#) show that the way teachers talk about students is an important source of information about the norms (cf. [Heller, 2015](#)) and values of the school system. [Mazeland and Berenst \(2008, 56f.\)](#), in summarizing research on descriptive practices influencing pupils' careers, highlight the ways different linguistic devices are employed to describe and assess students:

A speaker may assign a person to a type (e.g. ‘high-school student’, ‘repeaters’ [of a school year], ‘first-grader’, ‘sweet darling’, ‘conceited pest’), s/he may describe a characteristic of that person (e.g. ‘he works regularly’, ‘he has a language deficiency’). S/he may characterize the state or stage he is in (‘he's developing’, ‘... has collapsed completely’); s/he may ascribe attitudes (‘diligent’, ‘tricky’), s/he may assess that person in terms of a scale (‘very weak’, ‘reasonable’, ‘he doesn't organize well enough’).

Interestingly, [Mazeland and Berenst](#) explicitly refer to the role of narratives in such assessment meetings: Teachers “may provide a report on this person (e.g. give a list of grades, tell about a development, or make a comparison). S/he may tell a story that supports some implied judgment, etc.” ([Mazeland & Berenst 2008, 57](#)).

Apart from educators' assessment meetings, parent–teacher conferences represent another activity pertinent to pupils' educational careers. [Pillet-Shore \(2003, 2012\)](#) offers insights into parent–teacher conferences within a conversation analytic framework. She shows the institutional implications of many speech activities that are carried out during the conferences and examines negatively valenced critical talk about students ([Pillet-Shore, 2003](#)) which resembles the talks we will discuss in this article. Parents defend themselves against the possible interpretation that they are in any way praising their own children throughout the parent–teacher-conference, not only because such talk implicates self-praise, but also because such comments compromise the parents' tacit claim to be fair evaluators of their own children ([Pillet-Shore, 2012](#)).

The present study

The present study aims at contributing to the growing body of research on parent–teacher conferences. In particular, this specific type of educational discourse has so far not received much attention in the German-speaking countries. The present study enriches our understanding of the interactive dynamics of parent–teacher conferences by focusing on

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