Not Just Communication: Parent–Teacher Conversations in an English High School

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Abstract

In this article we report case study research which focused on the nature of parent–teacher conversations at one English high school. Our research aims were to discover what parents and teachers said to each other during these events and examine how they constructed their talk. Audio recordings of parent–teacher meetings/conferences were analyzed using conversation analysis (CA). One-to-one interviews with parents, students, and teachers, academic reports, and school records were also used as supporting evidence. Our results showed that, when the student was present, parents and teachers frequently joined forces during meetings, working together to seek to modify the child's study habits or conduct. The extent of this behavior was surprising, occurring in almost every conversation in which the student was present. Using Epstein's typology, we suggest that these examples of collaboration might be more accurately described as Type 3 involvement—in-school assistance—rather than Type 2 involvement—communication. We conclude that these meetings can be occasions during which parents and teachers do more than merely exchange information when they meet and talk.

Key Words: communication, parent–teacher conversations, meetings, conferences, England, English high school, parental involvement, communicating, United Kingdom, family engagement

Introduction

The field of parental involvement has been an active area of international research interest for several decades (e.g., Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Jeynes, 2010). Since parent–teacher meetings (also called conferences) provide one opportunity for such involvement, we have examined the talk that takes place between parents and teachers when they meet face-to-face. In this article we report on the propensity for parents and teachers to engage in forms of concerted action that encourage students to improve aspects of their learning; we also describe the various forms that this could take. Our findings thus provide empirical evidence that cooperation—doing what is wanted by another person—and in some cases collaboration—working with another person in order to achieve some common goal—does occur between parents and teachers when they meet. Conflict between parents and teachers was also observed during the course of our research, though such cases were few in number and are not the subject of this article. While this research was conducted at a single school, the salient features of these conversations may provide insights that are of relevance to researchers or educators working in other settings worldwide.

Formal parent–teacher meetings are both widespread and well-established throughout the English education system, being staged by the vast majority of schools and attended by a high proportion of parents (Peters, Seeds, Goldstein, & Coleman, 2007). Moreover, such meetings in one form or another are an established practice within education systems internationally (e.g., Lemmer, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015; Pillet-Shore, 2015; Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). Parent–teacher meetings are important since they present one of the few opportunities for parents to engage in direct, two-way communication with teachers (Walker, 1998). However, they require significant investments of time and can be tense, stressful occasions for those involved (Graham-Clay, 2005; MacLure & Walker, 2000), often causing parents to feel frustrated or dissatisfied (Lemmer, 2012; Walker, 1998). Our search of the literature has revealed little reported research based on the talk which occurs between parents and teachers when they meet in high school contexts (11–16 years age range), the last significant study in England being reported by MacLure and Walker (2000). Our study attempts to address this gap by collecting and analyzing direct recordings of parent–teacher conversations at one English high school.

Literature Review

Parental Involvement and Partnership

There is an extensive body of research which indicates that parental involvement has a significant, beneficial effect on children's achievement (e.g., Jeynes, 2007; Patrikakou, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Symeou, 2006). In addition, a number of researchers support mutually beneficial relationships between parents and teachers, in which both parties are equally responsible for ensuring that students learn effectively. For example, Henderson and Mapp (2002) proposed a "philosophy of partnership" and a sharing of power; Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, and Gordon (2009) advocated a "more equitable approach" to parental involvement; and Cox (2005) emphasized collaborative relationships involving two-way exchanges of information. This approach can also be extended to include the child in schools which have replaced or augmented conventional parent–teacher meetings with student-led conferences (SLC). Tuinstra and Hiatt-Michael (2004) pointed out how the implementation of SLC encourages students to take greater responsibility for their learning and set their own educational goals; Tholander (2011) reports that SLC leads to more open conversations in which the student participates more actively, while O'Fee (2012) describes these meetings as a means to get students fully involved in the process of home–school communication. There thus appears to be a consensus within the research literature in which equal partnership between parents and teachers—and also students—is promoted as an ideal.

Theoretical Foundations

The notion of partnership between parents and teachers is supported by a number of theoretical frameworks, most notably Epstein's (1987, 1992, 1995) theory of overlapping spheres and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) parental involvement model. Epstein's theory emphasizes the family, school, and community—three overlapping spheres—as important interacting systems affecting a child's development. Central to Epstein's theory is the notion that, within the overlapping regions, the development needs of children are best met when families, schools, and communities engage in cooperative action in order to achieve their mutual interests. A further important assumption is that the achievement of these common goals can be facilitated by the actions of schools and teachers (Epstein, 1987). Epstein's theory provides the basis for her much-cited typology (Epstein, 1995), in which she proposes six types of parental involvement: (1) parenting; (2) communicating; (3) volunteering; (4) learning at home; (5) decision-making; and (6) collaborating with the community. By contrast, Hoover-Dempsey and

Sandler treat parental involvement as a process which occurs on various levels, the final aim being students' academic success. The first level is concerned with the reasons why parents become involved in their child's learning; the next level focuses on the forms that this involvement takes; this is followed by the mechanisms used by parents during involvement activities and how these are perceived by students; finally, student attributes favorable for achievement are considered. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model usefully complements Epstein's theory since it explains why parents become involved and provides mechanisms which explain how they can influence educational outcomes.

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Some researchers have observed that collaborative relationships tend not to occur in practice (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lemmer, 2012; Shumow, Lyutykh, & Schmidt, 2011; Sormunen, Tossavainen, & Turunen, 2011), with many studies attempting to explain this in terms of barriers to parental involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Several studies have described how material factors—notably lack of time due to work commitments (Ferrara, 2009; Semke & Sheriden, 2012) and child care issues (Peters et al., 2007)—can account for differences in levels of parental involvement. This has been found to be particularly the case for parents from poor or working-class backgrounds (Kyle, 2011), single parents (Kohl et al., 2000), or for parents with disabilities (Stalker, Brunner, Maguire, & Mitchell, 2011). Researchers have also invoked social or cultural barriers between working class parents on one side and schools and teachers on the other (Auerbach, 2007; Crozier, 1999; Lareau, 1987; Wanat, 2010). Wanat (2010), for example, concluded that parents whose life experiences and social background were different from teachers often felt discouraged from becoming involved and did not build constructive relationships.

A number of researchers have suggested that parents will be less likely to become involved if they feel that they lack the knowledge or skills needed to make a difference. Schnee and Bose (2010), for example, reported that many parents from low-income, minority backgrounds chose not to become involved in their child's mathematics learning because they lacked confidence in their ability or were unfamiliar with new teaching methods. Moreover, Drummond and Stipek (2004) suggested that parents will only become involved in their child's education if they see it as part of their role, this being dependent on their socioeconomic status, level of education, or ethnicity. By contrast, parents who believe they can make an effective difference have been found to provide greater levels of at-home support (Junttila, Vauras, & Laakkonen, 2007).

Finally, several studies have referred to the attitudes or beliefs held by parents and teachers which may serve to deter involvement (Dobbins & Abbott,

2010; Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008; Ferrara, 2010; Katyal & Evers, 2007). Dobbins and Abbott (2010), for example, pointed to parental concerns about infringing on the professional authority of teachers, whilst Katyal and Evers (2007) found that teachers in a non-western context saw themselves as the experts and were resistant to the notion of equal partnership on matters relating to students' learning. Moreover, some researchers have suggested that parents tend to be viewed by teachers merely as vehicles to deliver curriculum content (Baeck, 2010; Schnee & Bose, 2010), with Hughes and Greenhough (2006) using the term "colonization" to describe a process in which schools impose their own systems and values on families.

Intrinsic Difficulties and Theoretical Limitations

More fundamentally perhaps, some researchers have suggested that the nature of the parent–teacher relationship itself is essentially confrontational, thus precluding the possibility of partnership based on equality and common interests. MacLure and Walker (2000), for example, pointed out the asymmetrical power relationships between parents and teachers, whilst Matthiesen (2015) found that parents were systematically silenced during parent–teacher conferences. Also, Lareau (1987) suggested that parents have "particularistic" aims and seek to promote the interests of their own child, whereas teachers have "universalistic" aims and strive to support the development of all the students they teach. McNamara et al. (2000) arrived at similar conclusions; starting from the idea of education as a free market, they noted the inherent conflict within such a system—teachers working towards performance targets at the school level and parents seeking to maximize the benefits for their child. Whilst these studies may be small scale and locally bound, the challenge that they pose to the notion of parental involvement based on cooperative relationships with shared responsibility is significant; seen from this perspective, tension and conflict are intrinsic to the parent–teacher relationship and would not be avoided by removing external barriers.

The ability of the current theoretical models to explain more recent quantitative evidence has also been questioned (Jeynes, 2011); based on several meta-analyses—in which a number of independent studies were systematically reviewed and their findings combined—Jeynes (2011) concluded that the existing theories do not take into account the wide-ranging and complex nature of parental involvement as revealed by the latest empirical research. He suggests that a more sophisticated theoretical framework is needed that takes into account subtle, previously unrecognized aspects of parental involvement such as parental expectations, parenting style, and parent–child communication. It would appear that, while parental involvement based on mutually supportive,

equitable relationships between parents and teachers is beneficial, there are a number of difficulties for those supporting this approach.

Methodology

Given the apparent "gap between the rhetoric and the reality of parental involvement" (Hornby & Lafaele, 2000, p. 37), our primary research aim was to determine the nature and extent of cooperation between parents and teachers during their face-to-face conversations. Our research questions were thus concerned with *what* participants were trying to achieve through their talk, *how* they went about this, and *why*. We approached these questions in the spirit of open-minded curiosity, our aim being to learn more about parent–teacher interactions and to identify salient themes as they emerged. In terms of our research philosophy, we have taken a social constructionist approach (Hammersley, 2012), making the assumption that participants construct a shared version of reality which is continuously negotiated and renegotiated as they work to achieve their aims. With regard to research design, our investigation can be considered as a multiple case study (Stake, 2005) in which each conversation was treated as a separate and unique event, accessed through audio recordings made by the participants themselves.

The School Context

Our research was conducted in a relatively small, non-selective high school located on the outskirts of a rural village in the north of England. This school serves a relatively affluent, mainly White British community and has a strong Christian ethos. Parent–teacher meetings at this school are held only on certain dates of the year—designated by the school—and take place in the main hall between 4:00 and 7:00 p.m., parents being usually accompanied by their children. The school stages five of these events—referred to as parents' evenings—every academic year, each one being dedicated to the students of a particular year group. The evenings themselves comprise of a series of face-to-face meetings, each scheduled to last for five minutes, with parents moving between teachers who remain seated at tables. A teacher might have up to 36 meetings with parents and their children during the course of an evening.

Data Collection

Conversations were recorded during 10 parents' evening events over a period of two academic years. Before each of these, we randomly selected two parents (from separate families) and two teachers. Participants were then contacted—parents by telephone, teachers face-to-face—to explain the aims and

nature of the study and request consent. This procedure was repeated until two parents and two teachers had agreed to be recorded, at which point the relevant students were asked if they would also be willing to participate. Having gained verbal agreement, the prospective participants were then supplied with a background information sheet/consent form which they were asked to complete and return to the principal researcher on arrival at the parents' evening (students were contacted by a non-teaching member of the staff at the school, outside of lesson time and away from the direct influence of their parents or teachers). Additionally, we targeted a small number of participants whose circumstances seemed atypical (e.g., a newly qualified teacher engaging in her first professional contact with parents), the aim being to capture less common patterns of talk that might shed light on more routine encounters (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2002). During the parents' evenings, participants each recorded two of their meetings using a hand-held digital recorder, giving the researchers up to eight conversations per event. Allowing for operator error and parents who did not attend, 54 meetings (out of a possible 80) were recorded in this manner, though one teacher and one parent subsequently withdrew their consent, leaving 52 conversations for analysis, 50 of which were attended by students as well as parents.

Data Analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) was used to analyze the data from recorded conversations; this involves the systematic examination of the talk which takes place between people in ordinary settings (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2002). Transcripts of real-life conversations—those not staged by the researcher—are examined to determine how participants use their talk to perform various actions. CA requires the analyst to follow procedures which prevent or restrict "common sense" knowledge, allowing taken-for-granted understandings to be detected that might otherwise be overlooked (Ten Have, 1990). This proved to be particularly important for our research since the principal researcher was also a practicing teacher at the school in question and therefore had a detailed knowledge of the school setting and a familiarity with the personal characteristics and circumstances of the participants; it therefore seems likely that he would have been less able to identify taken-for-granted understandings and more prone to bias than a researcher not so deeply immersed in the context of the study. Further, we adopted a number of reflexive strategies designed to circumvent or reduce our limitations as researchers; most notably, we subjected our work to "outsider audits" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004) whereby we asked a number of researchers with expertise in the field of parental involvement—but not directly connected with our study—to review and critically evaluate our assumptions, methods, and interpretations.

CA can identify interactional features of talk between participants that might not be detected using other approaches and provides a detailed view of *how* participants construct their talk. In its pure form, however, CA does not admit evidence from beyond the particular stretch of talk being examined. Data from sources such as interviews, for example, cannot be considered, and wider contexts (e.g., the gender of the speaker) must be ignored unless raised by the participants themselves at that point in the conversation (Wooffit, 2005). Instead, claims are supported by "going to the next turn," the assumption being made that a participant's response depends on the talk that immediately precedes it (Cameron, 2001). Some researchers have pointed out that this is unduly restrictive and limits answers to the question of *why* participants say what they do (Wetherell, 1998). With regard to this problem, Schegloff (1997) has proposed a two-part approach which involves an initial "formal" analysis, conducted using CA and based solely on the talk in question, followed by a "situated" analysis, in which wider contexts or evidence from secondary sources can be considered. This is the approach that we have adopted in this study.

Prior to our analysis, we transcribed all 52 of the conversations using an abbreviated version of the widely used Jefferson system (Wetherell, 1998), the aim being to produce a transcript that was easy to read whilst retaining sufficient information for meaningful analysis; see the Appendix for an explanation of the unusual punctuation and so on. Since the accurate transcription and detailed analysis of these conversations proved to be far more time consuming than expected, we randomly selected 20 conversations—19 of which included the student—and analyzed them according to the strict procedural requirements of CA. The parents, students, and teachers involved in these conversations were then approached again and asked if they would be willing to (separately) take part in follow-up interviews; some parents were unable or unwilling to do so, giving us 15 conversations which were supported by interviews from all of the participants. During these interviews, participants were provided with a copy of the transcript and invited to give their interpretation of the conversation or to present any background information that they felt might be relevant. Interviews were informal in nature (rather than semi-structured), our rationale being that, since each case was set within a distinct context, flexibility and sensitivity were more important than consistency (Burgess, 1984). A "backdrop" to the meeting was then constructed, taking into account interview data as well as academic reports and demographic information obtained from the school records, thus providing insights as to why participants constructed their talk as they did.

Findings

In this section, we report on the various ways in which parents and teachers acted cooperatively to bring about improved educational outcomes for students. To illustrate and add credence to the claims being made, a relevant example is presented alongside each of our major findings—note that pseudonyms have been used for all persons. Line numbers are included for reference, and the following abbreviations are used throughout: T = teacher; M = mother; F = father; S = student.

1. Challenging Poor Behavior, Attitude, or Effort

Of the 20 conversations analyzed, teachers reported problems or student shortcomings in 11 cases. In three of these, they took a challenging line, leading the student through a series of carefully framed questions designed to establish the "facts" and get them to accept responsibility. Parents tended to act as spectators during the early part of these sequences before intervening to reinforce the teacher's message towards the end. This behavior is in good agreement with Walker (2002), who has reported that some teachers saw parents' evenings as an opportunity to discipline students.

10	T:	I've noticed in my classroom for example where
11		your bench is that sometimes (.) you're quite (.)
12		willing to be distracted by other people around you would
13		you say that was a fair comment?
14	S:	yeah (0.5)
15	T:	now Miss Regan said that she's moved you to the front of the
16		class (1.0) do you think that's improved things?
17	S:	(1.0) not really
18	T:	why's that?
19	S:	(1.0) I don't know
20	M:	are you still getting involved in others' conversations?
21	S:	yeah
22	M:	even if you're sat at the front? ((sounds exasperated))
23		(2.0)
24	T:	what could we do to stop you getting involved in other
25		people's conversations? (1.5) I mean bear' bearing in
26		mind that it's fifty-fifty there's other people (.)
27	S:	oh [yeah]
28	T:	[having] conversations as well we're not saying it's all

29		[your (fault)]
30	M:	[but Helena's] the one to make the choices whether she's
31		gonna answer back an' get involved
32		(3.0)
33	T:	so that's one thing I think we could do isn't it? (.) we need a
34		more focused attitude (.) right?
35	S:	yeah

In this example, the teacher asks six questions, forming a pattern that was also observed in other parents' evening conversations: the first two questions oblige the student to acknowledge her shortcomings (lines 12–13 & 16), thus establishing the teacher's assessment as truthful and reasonable before proceeding; the teacher's next two questions are more searching (lines 18 & 24–25), the first asking the student to explain her behavior and the second requiring her to provide a solution; on proposing his own solution, the teacher then utilizes tag questions (lines 33 & 34) so as to secure agreement (Moore & Podesva, 2009).

The parent appears to make clear that she has little sympathy with her child, her questions (lines 20 & 22) sounding more like expressions of dismay than requests for confirmation; the parent's use of the word "even" (line 22) gives the impression of surprise or disbelief that the problem has not yet been resolved. Moreover, when she speaks to the teacher directly (lines 30–31), the parent rejects the suggestion that the blame should be shared with others and makes it clear that her child should carry full responsibility for her actions; she thus positions herself with the teacher, in opposition to her child. The parent may be doing identity work here—by showing her dismay that this problem has not yet been resolved and by rejecting any softening offered by the teacher, she appears to be adopting the moral high ground and presenting herself as a "good" parent. This is in keeping with MacLure and Walker (2000), who suggested that participants work to construct moral versions of themselves during parents' evening conversations, and also with Pillet-Shore (2015), who described how parents seek to demonstrate that they are both well-informed about their child's shortcomings and concerned enough to take corrective action.

For her part, the student plays a subordinate role in this sequence and creates no turns of her own. When the teacher's question requires more than a single-word answer, she keeps her reply very brief (line 19); she also signals her opposition to the teacher's questions by delaying her replies (lines 17 & 19), allowing lengthy pauses to develop. Moreover, the student does not respond at all to the parent when it appears that her turn should naturally follow (lines 22–23). While she does not openly defy either the teacher or her parent, the

student thus appears to be resisting this line of questioning by providing only minimal responses (Svennevig, 2000).

2. Persuading Students to Work Harder

Talk in which both parents and teachers worked together to improve students' effort was highly prevalent throughout the parents' evening conversations recorded in our study. A characteristic feature of such "persuasive" talk was the way in which unfavorable comparisons were made between the student and other, harder-working (though often unspecified) individuals or groups.

115 T: yes yeah I'd say do [an hour]
116 M: [I think] you could do an hour
117 T: =mm
118 M: you know I when I well when I went to school I studied
119 three [four]
120 T: [yeah]
121 M: hours a day nowadays they don't have to do that any
122 more (.) you put half an hour an hour in for a subject (0.5) I
123 mean it's nothing
124 T: >well I I've said really< the A and A-star students who've
125 come through over the years >I mean< even
126 Alessandra's year group aren't getting those grades by
127 just doing the three hours in class and the homework that
128 was set ((Alessandra is the student's academically successful
129 older sister))
130 S: yeah yeah
131 T: even if it was a test paper they are (.) erm spending
132 longer than the hour and forty-five on the test paper and
133 going away and looking stuff up and th they're trying
134 constantly to get full marks [on the practice papers]
135 S: [yeah I mean I do] do that
136 on the practice papers ((sounds indignant))
137 T: °yeah°
138 S: I do do that
139 T: but just up the levels a bit
140 S: >OK< [alright]
141 T: [if you've] got the time which you obviously have

142 do a bit more studying [go back to some topics]
143 M: [well I keep saying it's] erm yeah cos
144 the mock exams begin soon so I say you've got to revise
145 T: start revising now (.) some people are telling me that
146 they're revising now in your group and £some of those
147 names might surprise you£

In the excerpt above, both the teacher and the parent bring pressure to bear on the student by comparing her in three different ways. The first of these can be seen over lines 118–123 when the parent compares the amount of study she did herself when at school with the work that the student appears to be doing at the moment. The teacher then follows by describing how high achieving students in a previous year group worked hard to achieve the top grades (lines 124–134); her description of these students "constantly trying to get full marks" conveys the impression of hard working individuals seeking perfection, implying that this is the standard expected. The teacher then goes on to make a further comparison over lines 145–147, disclosing that some students who might not be expected to undertake extra study are in fact doing so; here, the implication appears to be that, if those not normally considered to be academically orientated are revising, then this student should be, too.

Note how the student rejects the suggestion that she is not already working hard enough (lines 135–136 & 138)—the fact that she creates a turn for herself by overlapping with the teacher indicates that she feels this is an important point. The teacher's *sotto voce* response appears to acknowledge that she has committed an impropriety (Lerner, 2013). This does not appear to suffice, however, since the student then repeats her assertion, to which the teacher offers the compromise, "but just up the levels a bit." During her interview, the student expressed her sense of injustice at the suggestion that she was not working hard enough and also described her displeasure on finding herself isolated by her parent:

> The lecturing bothered me slightly because [the teacher] made it seem to my mum that we hadn't been doing any revision at all, when I knew that I had; we'd been doing, like, six hours a week, which is more than [the teacher] told me to do…and then Mum sided with [the teacher], and it was, like, '"You've seen the revision I've been doing, what's going on?"

It would appear from this that the student perceived her parent and the teacher to be working together (and against her) during this conversation. Such a division is in marked contrast to reports of a "binary opposition" between parents and teachers (MacLure & Walker, 2000, p. 22). It is, however, in agreement with Markstrom (2013) who found that some secondary school students felt

nervous or uncomfortable about the possibility that parents and teachers might "gang up" on them in order to influence their home or school life (p. 50).

3. Giving Advice or Instruction

Throughout the conversations recorded in our study, teachers showed a marked tendency to give students advice, typically during the latter half of conversations following the delivery of their assessment. This could be general in nature, aimed at improving a student's study skills, or technical and based on some specific aspect of their learning. These sequences were invariably supported by parents, with students usually indicating their agreement through short, one-word responses.

62	T:	=explain things explain using the word "because" extend
63		your explanation (.) and to get over the hump into level
64		five (.)
65	M:	mm
66	T:	you need to be start being a little more technical
67	S:	OK
68	T:	when the poem says for example "like rabbit and deer"
69		that's what we call a simile
70	M:	right
71	S:	right
72	T:	so it's it's with you Danny you need to be a little bit more
73		technical >you say< this simile makes me think of (.)
74	M:	like [you need to use similes and]
75	T:	[er a scared animal for instance]
76	M:	metaphors and actually nail that [down]
77	T:	[but] then it's mainly for
78		effect
79	M:	so main mainly (1.0) >what would you call it< (1.0)
80		you'd call it=
81	T:	=a device [it's a device]
82	M:	[a device] so it's mainly a device
83	S:	right
84	M:	and explain how it affects
85	S:	and use "because"
86	T:	[and use]
87	M:	[yes yes]

88 T: "because" and use "because" to extend your explanation
89 M: explanation
90 T: and that's level five stuff which is where we which is
91 where we're heading
92 M: where we want to be

In this example, the parent repeatedly endorses the teacher's advice, intervening with nonverbal and single-word expressions of support (lines 65, 70, & 89) or paraphrasing what he just said (line 92). Additionally, she takes the opportunity of a short pause to deliver a fully formulated turn in which she both summarizes and extends the teacher's preceding instruction (lines 74 & 76).

Elsewhere in this conversation, these roles become reversed; the teacher explicitly supports the parent, confirming that he is of the same view and presenting a unified front to the student:

402 M: are you going to (work) at it (.) yeh↑ y' at the moment
403 the more the more you work at it the more pleasure you'll
404 get out of it as well (.) [yeh OK]
405 T:→ [that's true] that's true (.) there's
406 → nothing wrong with reading history books Danny
407 M: right and it's not supposed to be a problem yeah I love
408 reading

During her interview, the parent stated that this conversation would have been simpler but also less productive had her child not been present, presumably since this would have precluded the possibility of instructing him so as to improve his performance. While cases of parents and teachers "working" on students in this way do not appear to have been previously reported in the literature, there is some support for the notion that the conversation would have been more straightforward without the student. Tveit (2007, 2009), for example, reports that the presence of students during parent–teacher conferences changed both the form and content of meetings, resulting in an emphasis on tact rather than truthfulness and the avoidance of sensitive topics. Similarly, Walker (2002) found that some teachers felt more able to give an honest assessment when the student was not there, whilst other teachers expressed concerns that reporting sensitive information to parents in the presence of the student could undermine student–teacher relationships.

4. Supporting and Reassuring Students

Talk in which both the parent and teacher worked to reassure the student occurred in five meetings, three of which involved children with special

educational needs. In contrast to conversations involving "challenging" or "persuasive" talk, these students were all considered to be conscientious and hardworking by their teachers; there was also little repetition or hesitation in talk of this nature and few signs of tension between the participants, most turns being delivered in a straightforward manner without hedging or mitigated speech.

49	S:	=I like drawing but I'm not too great at it I can't (draw)
50		to save my life
51	T:	well actually Clare my notes about your drawing says that
52		you've got a lot of potential with your drawing because
53		you do draw very (.) sensitively and you pay attention to
54		the small details and you work very (.) carefully with
55		color as well (.) so actually I see potential may maybe
56		you haven't yet produced a finished drawing that you
57		think wow that's super but I can see at this stage in year
58		nine that you <u>can</u> draw already >and you've got the
59		potential to do some really nice drawings< and actually
60		the at the at the heart of this fine art course the one thing
61		that (.) erm examiners like to see is that you started off
62		by doing some drawings as part of your research so we
63		<u>will</u> be doing drawing (.) an' believe me just just relax
64		'cos you will do it nicely
65	F:	I think we've seen a big improvement actually in her
66		ability she's changed
67	T:	yeh
68	F:	because she's producing work that's more competent
69		isn't it
70	S:	na:y ((denial sounds half-hearted))
71	F:	ha ha sh' she gained an interest
72	T:	yeh
73	F:	she's trying to express herself
74	T:	yeh
75	F:	she's drawing pictures that she's putting on the wall
76	T:	yeh
77	F:	from (.) her first attempts [she's been thinking]
78	S:	[they were terrible]
79	F:	I can't do this

80 T: ha ha ha
81 F: and then actually because she tried
82 T: yeh
83 F: we w' everybody could see
84 T: yeh
85 F: that she was actually making something
86 T: yeh and that is one of the qualities that you've got which'll
87 make you (.) >succeed [in your exams] is that you are (.) a
88 tryer aren't you (.) you are a hard worker and you want to
89 achieve success you don't give up do you and just throw
90 the towel in (.) you do actually carry on an' say no I I'll
91 give it another go (.) an' I'll be there with you every step
92 of the way so together we'll we'll get there we'll have
93 success

In this example, it is the student who initiates a "reassurance" sequence by making a self-critical comment relating to her art skills (lines 49–50). This is followed by a lengthy turn from the teacher, who works to reassure her in several ways. Firstly, she uses evidence from her notes to directly contradict the student's negative self-assessment (lines 51–55 & 58–59). Secondly, the teacher highlights the student's personal qualities, namely her work ethic and ability to persevere (lines 87–91). Additionally, the teacher makes it clear that she will be working alongside the student to support her throughout the course, stated explicitly (lines 91–93) and also implied by her pronoun shift from "you" to "we" as her turn progresses. The parent then follows the teacher's lead, pointing to the noticeable progress that his child has made through practicing her drawing at home. Here, the teacher encourages the parent to continue by following each of the parent's statements with the word "yeh" (lines 67, 72, 74, & 76), before endorsing his point with further reassurance work of her own (lines 86–93). This stands in contrast to researchers who have reported a tendency for teachers to play down or ignore information volunteered by parents (MacLure & Walker, 2000) or to control conversations by shifting the focus away from parental concerns and onto their own agenda (Matthiesen, 2015).

During their separate interviews, both the parent and the teacher acknowledged that the student's drawing abilities were limited, though the teacher stated that since she believed success in her subject to depend on confidence, she was trying to "emphasize the positives and overlook the negatives" during this conversation. Similarly, the parent described how he had been working to support the teacher in reassuring his child and in boosting her confidence. For her part, the student seemed to be under no illusions about her limited talents;

she stated that she had not been looking for reassurance during this parents' evening conversation and had simply wanted to know if her skills were sufficient for her to enroll in the course.

Discussion

The findings which have emerged from our study provide evidence to show that parents and teachers in this context worked together during their conversations in order to bring about mutually desirable educational goals by exerting their influence on the co-present student. This could take the form of challenges to students' behavior, attitude, or effort; persuasive talk aimed at improving their study habits; reassurance; or technical instruction or general advice regarding learning. Moreover, this behavior was found to occur regardless of the age, gender, or social background of the parents involved. While teachers typically initiated and led these sequences, parents often played an active supporting role, endorsing and sometimes extending the teacher's message. Such alliances were not openly negotiated during meetings and occurred even where the participants had not previously met, suggesting that parents and teachers developed a tacit understanding of their respective roles as these conversations unfolded. Where disagreement or resistance occurred, this tended to be between parents and teachers on the one side and students on the other. The behavior we have reported in this article was observed in almost every conversation (of the 20 that we analyzed in detail) in which the student was present, meaning that most parents in our study acted cooperatively—in support of the teacher's wishes—at some point.

Links to the Literature

Our findings stand in contrast to those researchers who point to a lack of involvement from parents (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011) or who describe conversations between parents and teachers in terms of asymmetrical power relationships (Lemmer, 2012; Matthiesen, 2015; Symeou, 2003), contested authority (Weininger & Lareau, 2003), or binary opposition (MacLure & Walker, 2000). As we have already noted, disagreements or challenges did occur, though these were relatively rare; across the 52 conversations in our data set, we encountered three in which the parents—two of whom were teachers themselves—could be considered to be acting in opposition to the teacher or the school. Taking into account the potential for conflict between participants and the difficulties with the notion of partnership-based parental involvement outlined earlier, the extent of cooperation between parents and teachers in our study came as a surprise. Such behavior does not appear to have been previously reported in the literature, and there are a number of reasons as to why this might be.

First of all, this pattern of talk can only occur when the student is present. For the parents' evening meetings at the school in which this research was based, this applied to all but two of the conversations recorded. However, for teacher–parent conversations within the U.S. primary sector, the student does not typically attend (Pillet-Shore, 2012, 2015; Weininger & Lareau, 2003), meaning that this behavior could not have been observed. Also, for those studies in which students accompanied their parents (MacLure & Walker, 2000; Tveit, 2007, 2009), the proportion of conversations in which they were actually present was somewhat lower than the current study (55% for MacLure & Walker, 2000; 41% for Tveit, 2007). Whilst not precluding the possibility of concerted action to influence students, this makes the detection of such behavior less likely.

Secondly, the context in which our study was conducted may have influenced the talk observed—as noted earlier, the school is small by U.K. standards and serves a relatively affluent, mainly White, rural community. Moreover, our study took place at a time when the number of school-aged children in the catchment area was falling, which had resulted in reduced working hours or terminated contracts for some teachers. Since prospective parents can choose from a number of competing local schools, this had made the teaching staff keenly aware of the need to achieve high academic standards and build a strong reputation in the local community in order to maintain student numbers.

Thirdly, changes have taken place at the policy level since the last relevant study by MacLure and Walker (2000); increased parental control of school decision-making and stronger inspection regimes have reinforced existing market-based legislation that frames school success in terms of exam results (Gillard, 2011). Given this scenario, it seems plausible to suggest that both parents and teachers felt under pressure to gain the best possible academic performance from students.

A further possibility is that the conceptual frameworks used by some researchers mean that cooperation based on mutual interests is not "seen." MacLure and Walker (2000), for example, viewed teacher–parent encounters from a Foucauldian perpective (Foucault, 1980, 1986) which focuses on power struggles, competing claims to knowledge, challenges, criticism, and blame allocation, whilst Weininger and Lareau (2003) used a conceptual framework based on notions of cultural capital and social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990) in which middle-class parents utilize their cultural capital to compete for scarce resources and confer educational advantage on their children. Both these theoretical approaches place the emphasis on conflict rather than cooperation. Tveit's (2009) conceptual framework seems better able to explain cooperation between teachers and parents, being based on Habermas's

(1984) notion of communicative action. Indeed, the conversational "by-plays" that she reports, in which the conversing adults embed covert messages within their talk, appear to be an example of cooperative behavior. However, her notion of tact versus truthfulness is still primarily concerned with the potential for participants to cause one another harm.

Implications

Our findings may have implications for researchers who use Epstein's typology of parental involvement to categorize conversations between parents and teachers; Epstein herself presented regular parent–teacher meetings, involving reciprocal exchange of information between parents and teachers, as her foremost example of Type 2 involvement (see Epstein, 1995, p. 701). Whilst most of the conversations we examined did contain sequences of (mainly one-way) communication, a large number of meetings also involved placing pressure on students to improve educational outcomes. These conversations might therefore be viewed as opportunities for parents and teachers to intervene directly in students' learning, and it could be argued that this form of parental involvement might be more accurately described as Type 3 involvement—volunteering in the form of in-school assistance. Indeed, several parents explained during their follow-up interviews that communication was of secondary importance; they pointed out that, since they had received a written report from the school prior to the parents' evening, they had already felt well-informed beforehand. Taken in their entirety, the conversations examined in our study thus cannot be accurately described as either Type 2 (communicating) or Type 3 (volunteering) involvement and so are difficult to incorporate into Epstein's framework. We therefore suggest that researchers might find it more useful to consider individual sequences of talk—rather than whole conversations—when describing the types of parental involvement that take place during parent–teacher meetings.

The fact that the parents and teachers in our study were seeking to modify student behavior during parents' evening meetings may also have implications for schools. According to Epstein et al. (2002), each type of parental involvement presents particular challenges for its successful implementation; Type 2 involvement requires schools to communicate clearly, in a way that can be easily understood by parents, and also to obtain feedback from them, whereas effective Type 3 involvement requires that parents feel welcomed and that their contribution is valued. Schools wishing to incorporate Type 3 involvement into parent–teacher meetings would therefore need to modify their approach. Such involvement would not, however, be without its drawbacks; Lareau (1987), for example, points to increased levels of anxiety when students are placed under pressure to achieve academic success, whilst Hughes and Greenhough (2006)

note the tendency for schools to impose their educational values on families. Both of these problems could be exacerbated if parent–teacher meetings were to be used by teachers to "work" on students, raising the question of whether or not such involvement would be beneficial. We suggest that individual schools need to consider their own context and decide for themselves what they want to achieve during these meetings, what type of involvement would best bring about these aims, and what might be the consequences (both desirable and undesirable) for those involved.

Conclusions

This research began as an exploration—motivated by simple curiosity—of parents' evening conversations in one English high school, our aim being to determine what participants did and how they went about this during these events. The evidence which emerged from our study showed that, when students were present, parents and teachers at this school very often worked together, joining forces to influence the child and so achieve some shared educational goal. This could take the form of challenges, persuasion, reassurance, technical instruction, or general advice. The parents' evening conversations that we examined thus seemed to be as much about the manipulation of students as communication between home and school. Such talk might be more accurately described as Type 3 (volunteering) rather than Type 2 (communicating) involvement, suggesting that sequences within parent–teacher conversations can span more than one category of Epstein's typology. These sequences occurred in almost every conversation in which the student was present—in contrast to previous research which suggests that parental involvement is rarely observed in practice (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lemmer, 2012; Shumow et al., 2011; Sormunen et al., 2011).

There are several reasons why this paper might contribute to the parental involvement research literature. First, it is based on direct observation of parents' evening conversations; the last such study set within an English high school context was reported more than 15 years ago (MacLure & Walker, 2000). More recent research has tended to be set within early years or primary school contexts or is not based on actual recordings of parent–teacher conversations. Secondly, this study utilizes CA to examine parent–teacher talk at the micro-level. We consider this to be a particularly powerful way to analyze the data, reducing researcher bias and helping to identify patterns of talk that might otherwise have gone undetected. Additionally, this study reveals a salient and repeatedly occurring feature of parents' evening conversations that does not appear to have been previously reported, namely sequences of talk in which

parents and teachers worked cooperatively so as to further the educational progress of students. This may have implications for parent–teacher meetings that go beyond the context of our study.

As we have already stated, our research was conducted in a single, somewhat atypical, English high school, and we acknowledge that our data may have been influenced by the nature of the research setting, including the demographic characteristics of the parents involved or their social and cultural backgrounds. The extent to which our findings can be generalized are thus limited, though we would maintain that practitioners or researchers working elsewhere might usefully transfer our findings to their own context. Further research across a range of contexts involving a wider variety of participants would be required to determine whether our findings are general in nature or due to local circumstances—in particular, the fact that two of the three parents who engaged in conflict were teachers seems interesting, suggesting the possibility that knowledge of the education system might be working to override power differences between the participants. This study was also restricted by the way in which the conversations were sampled; while participants were chosen randomly, the conversations selected were unavoidably subject to bias. This was because a small number of teachers steered the principal researcher towards "good" conversations or requested that meetings in which sensitive issues were likely to be discussed were avoided. Also, several teachers failed to operate the recording device correctly at the start of meetings; given the simplicity of the controls, it seems plausible to suggest that this could have been a strategy used by teachers to avoid "difficult" encounters. Additionally, conversations were chosen according to the order in which they appeared on teachers' appointment sheets, resulting in more meetings at earlier times; this may have affected which parents were involved (e.g., more non-working parents might be expected during office hours) or the nature of the talk taking place (e.g., earlier meetings might be less affected by tiredness or lack of time).

On the one hand, parent–teacher meetings could be conceived as symbolic events with little practical purpose (MacLure & Walker, 2000; Weininger & Lareau, 2003); on the other, they could be seen as occasions when useful communication between home and school can take place (Epstein et al., 2002). Our research findings suggest that, when students are present, these events also provide opportunities for directly improving learning behavior; we thus present an alternative purpose for parent–teacher meetings that does not appear to have been previously reported. At the school in which our study took place, this feature of parents' evening conversations appears to have occurred spontaneously, rather than as a consequence of school policy. We would argue that this is not necessarily the best approach. Families and schools channel a

considerable amount of time and effort into parent–teacher meetings; if this is to be justified, then the nature of such meetings should not be left to chance. This article points to the potential for parent–teacher meetings to function differently; we suggest that it is up to individual schools to decide for themselves whether they wish to promote such a development and, if so, how best this could be achieved.

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Appendix. Transcription Notation

(Derived from Jefferson's full system; see Wetherell, 1998)

(.)	Just noticeable pause
(0.3) (2.3)	Examples of exactly timed pauses, in seconds
.hh hh	Speaker's in-breath and out-breath respectively
wo(h)rd	"Laughter" within words
end.	Full stop (period) denotes falling, ending intonation
word?	Question mark depicts rising, questioning intonation
£word phrase£	Pound signs enclose talk said in "smile voice"
cu-	A sharp cut-off of a prior word or sound
lo:ng	Stretching of the preceding sound
(word)	Transcriber's guess at an unclear part of the tape
run=on	Material that runs on
under	Emphasis using volume and/or pitch
°soft°	Speech noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk
>fast<	Talk noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk
over [lap]	Overlapping talk
[over]	
↑word	The onset of a noticeable pitch rise
↓word	The onset of a noticeable pitch descent