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The Work of Schooling

Giuseppina Marsico and Antonio Iannaccone¹**Abstract**

The communication process between the school and home is a universal relation that is crucial for cultural organization of human development. Through the *balcony metaphor*, the chapter outlines how the school is a *place in between*, a border constantly interfaced with both internal aspects (practices, discourses and different actors) and the wider sociocultural climate. The school balcony, as a border zone, is an area of contact with other relevant educational settings. By standing on the balcony and by adopting a binocular-type vision focused inside and outside school, this contribution explores the many processes implied in the work of schooling, moving from the role played by the socio-economic and cultural dimensions, passing through the analysis of intersectional points with other educational contexts (such as family-school meetings), arriving at the definition of identity in the school (the suggested *Educational Self notion*). The choice to “be” on the school balcony, even if it’s an uncomfortable position, allows one to assume a perspective where one is able to grasp the inherent dynamism of the boundary phenomena.

Keywords: balcony, boundary process, inside and outside the school, school-family intersection, Educational Self notion

When you think about the school, the most common image that comes to your mind is likely a large, multi-storied building with a spacious entrance and several rooms, more or less of the same size.



This image, that you probably draw from biographic memory and experience as a student, comes in clearly and seems ordinary to your eyes. Besides negligible details, the school seems a place connoted by some features—including architectural features—concurring to build a prototypical and shareable image. When we think about the work of schooling, something similar happens. Suddenly the image comes to mind of a classroom furnished in a standard way, with students and teachers carrying out some activities. The visual and virtual tour of the school, slowly winding before your eyes, seems to follow a specific pathway: you enter the building through the nearly empty entrance hall,

All conversational sequences we present in the following pages were fully transcribed according to the Jeffersonian conventions (Jefferson, 1985). See the appendix for symbol definitions that are used in the excerpts.



walk through the corridors,



enter a classroom where something is going on between teacher and students, following a format (front lesson, discussion, assessment).



But is that really all there is? Do not you think that something is missing? What's missing? Something does not actually appear in this journey—something that the schools do not have—a balcony.

Why a balcony? Why would a school need a balcony? Can you visualize a balcony? Obviously, a school does not need a balcony—but the school can be considered to be a metaphoric balcony of the society itself.

The School as a Balcony

Schools all over the world hardly ever have balconies². In this imaginary topology, we want to look at the work of schooling from the viewpoint of a metaphoric balcony. In our view, the school is just comparable to a balcony because it is exactly a *place in between*. It is part of the whole—an establishment of learning—but also a frontier, bordering on the outside. In fact, the balcony is a *place that is a nonplace*. It is an extension of the house where various events of daily life and many relevant social interactions take place. But the balcony is also a space outstretched toward the outside, suspended in space. It brings the intimacies of the inside to the public visibility on the border with the outside—without abandoning the inside.

School as balcony must constantly face the internal and external world in terms of culture—sociopolitical climate, social change, systems of beliefs and values, conceptions of education or, in other words, the *Weltanschauung* and *Bildung* shared at given time. It also faces challenges in terms of social norms (for example, how the relations between adults and children in different social settings are regulated) and of relations with others institutions (such as families, religious organizations, local authorities, etc.).

The metaphor evoked—like every metaphor—is not a strategic and simple way to summarize concepts. It is an evocative modality to talk about the work of schooling because it contains the way to immediately grasp the multifaceted and concrete state of this specific topic (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Dooremalen & Borsboom, 2010). Looking at the work of school from the balcony is certainly an uncommon and maybe uncomfortable position. On the balcony you are actually exposed to unexpected events such as the change of weather conditions. However, from the balcony you can observe both inside and outside the building. From this position you can grasp both internal elements coming out—like the good smell of coffee or an Italian kitchen, people laughing or quarrelling—and external elements coming in—for example, fresh air, light, smog, and noise. Many other things happen

in the narrow and hanging space of a balcony. The balcony actually exposes you to world outside. It is a physical space distinct from the house's interior, which is instead made of well-known objects with their usual place. It is a distinct social space where some forms of interaction with neighbors take place. From the balcony, you can observe life going on and be observed in return, you can look at the changing landscape, the world in movement, the succession of the seasons. On the balcony, you can grow plants or keep the dustbin.

Inside and Outside: The Balcony as a Border Zone

Applying this metaphor to the work of schooling, we may say that choosing to be on the balcony transcends the idea of school as a closed territory, characterized by its own culture of education (Bruner, 1996), estranged and far away from the real world. This choice rather assumes a perspective able to grasp the dynamism and movement between different social settings, connections and implications between school and broader culture characterized by some ideas about education, some specific form of social organization, beliefs, and shared models of behavior, as well as sociopolitical and economic change. In the metaphor, the balcony is the point of contact between the school—with its own practices and discourses (laughing and quarrelling), its old and new cultural artifacts (coffee, Italian kitchen, material and symbolic objects that are available and familiar)—and the outside world, where different social changes take place (succession of the seasons and change of landscape), and in which different educational models and belief systems coexist, sometimes opposing and disorienting (fresh air, light, smog, and noise). Like every boundary zone (Lewin, 1936; Tüomi-Gröhn, 2007; Tüomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003; Konkola, 2001), the school balcony is a place of social interaction with other actors (neighbors) and of intersection with other educational contexts, relevant for a child's development. In order to manage the encounter with the "Other" (for example, families, other education agencies, community), a school has at its disposal more or less adequate tools (plants or dustbin) that can make it fruitful or difficult meeting the world outside.

In this contribution we will attempt to better direct the look, focusing not only on what happens inside and outside school, but especially what happens on the border. The construct of "border"

seems to be heuristically relevant, from the point of view of psycho-social processes, to explore some psychological dynamics and exchanges between life contexts where development events take place. The use of boundary notion is, obviously, not new in psychology. Sufficient is to refer to Kurt Lewin's perspective focused on boundaries (Lewin, 1936).

BOUNDARY PROCESSES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL MEMBRANES

It is the boundary conditions—structured and dynamic as a "membranes" in biological systems (Belousov, 1998)—that we need to explore. The inherent open-ended nature of sociocultural phenomena requires a new theoretical framework that enables us to grasp the fluidity of the relations between different parts of the dynamic system (Tavory, Jablonka, & Ginsburg, 2011). Recent advances in modern biology seem to provide a set of heuristic concepts useful to investigate the complexity and fluidity of the relationship between different contexts. One of these is the notion of plasticity derived from Waddington's epigenetic approach (1940, 1957). *Plasticity* is related to the different possible responses (more or less adaptive, active, predictable, or reversible) of one organism to the various environmental conditions. Such fluid and opened-ended plasticity is a relevant feature of the boundary conditions. The interest for the boundary process is strictly connected with the "crossing boundaries" phenomena. It calls for focusing on what happened on the border or, following our metaphor, what happens on the balcony. We will adopt binocular-typevision, enabling us to constantly focus on both aspects—what happens to actors inside and outside school in the broader cultural context—because we are aware that school walls, as argued, are much more permeable than previously theorized by psychological research.

Even though constantly paying attention to the whole of field forces (Lewin, 1951) inside and outside school, we will attempt to "zoom in," from the analysis of some elements of sociocultural context significantly affecting education, to the way school gets in contact with other education agencies, to explore how the history of one's educational experience affects the definition of Self.

A View through the Balcony

Our privileged position *on the balcony* enables us to clearly observe the twofold function of school, referring to both individual and interpersonal

processes and contextual and cultural aspects with their interconnection. This position enables us to see the unity of differences operating within the same whole (Valsiner, 2009). School holds a prominent position in most societies—as well as in psychological research—because of its crucial role in both individual and social life. In the school context, the individual reaches a series of cognitive, social, and affective achievements that are fundamental in development to become able to appropriate of the culture he/she belongs to (Rogoff, 2003; Lopez, Najafi, Rogoff, & Arauz, 2011) and it happens through more and more active participation in shared social practices. Within the sociocultural context of a given society, school is also the catalyst element—sometimes propulsive, sometimes inhibitory—of specific social processes (Toomela & Valsiner, 2010; Cabell, 2010; Steinger, 2008). On the other hand, school plays more frequently a homeostatic function, devoted to preserving the *status-quo* of society.

Context as a Ground of a Figure

The key element allowing the creation of the relationship inside and outside the school is the idea of a link between context and culture with the *figure* itself (Kindermann & Valsiner, 1995). In this sense, context is the *background* of a *figure*, and cannot exist separately, according to Herbst's co-genetic logic (1995). When a phenomenon comes into being, context is necessarily there. This idea is in contrast with the cross-cultural and "traditional" psychological concept of context, understood as something into which a person is placed. Following this perspective, school should be a context into which a child is placed. Instead, we argue that when a child enters the school, this context becomes part of the child just because he is in the school. A relationship between the child and the school is thus established, rather than a unilateral effect of school, family, or society on the child. This could be an example of the view we would not follow—context, and its cultural features, as separated from individual processes taking place in school. In some sense, even Bronfenbrenner's model (1979) *de facto* accepts that view. He would probably oppose this claim, but the way he presents the context at multi-level essences of different systems actually separates the context from actors. Undoubtedly, the ecological theory of human development is one of the most interesting scientific perspectives to have emerged during the twentieth century to study the development processes. It

assumes that development can be understood only considering it as a process integrated with social and environmental conditions.

Since its first comparison in the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner's model has had a great impact on the psychological field. Unlike other models, although sophisticated, it offers conceptual tools essential to understand the relationship between certain specific elements of development and the role played by the characteristic of the environment. As stressed by the ecological systems perspective, family and school are the fundamental contexts in which social development takes place. This assumption, widely shared, is the basis of many researches that, at different levels, have examined how things work in these two micro-systems. Few studies, instead, have investigated their intersection. How and where do family and school contexts intersect? Which is the representations' systems produced by the actors in one context toward the other micro-system? Which are the regulatory dynamics taking place during the encounters of the two micro-systems? These questions require defining the nature of this intersection and the way in which the person becomes person-in-the-context. Valsiner's notion of context (1987) is closer to the concept of the functional relationship between person and environment, in which the organism creates the context and the context creates the organism in return, even if they are not melted into one entity. This differs from Rogoff's perspective (2003), in which the two aspects are considered similar and connected, rather than unified but separated. The idea of *inclusive separation* (Valsiner, 1987) is a more heuristic look at the relationships than the idea of *exclusive separation*, in which person and context are just separated—or *fusion*, in which they cannot be distinguished at all. A phenomenon cannot be theoretically analyzed "in relation" without having parts that relate. In order to understand the dynamic nature of the relationship between person, context, and culture, it is worthwhile to theoretically keep person and environment together, like separate entities always related as a whole.

THE MUTUAL FEED-FORWARD LOOP

The theoretical perspective—sensitive to the connections and mutual definition between different elements within the same whole and to the *mutual feed-forward loop* between person and context—seems to support the methodological choice of "positioning on the balcony," constantly directing the look inside and outside school. In this way, is thus

possible to examine how, during everyday activities inside school—on an intrapsychic and interpsychic level of analysis (Doise, 1982)—the extraordinary endeavour of the formation of higher mental processes (such as formal language, reasoning, problem solving, etc.) takes place. In addition, it is also possible to explore how the personality construction is consolidated through the relationship with others and significant adults. Within this dimension the construct of *Educational Self* is grafted. As we will argue more fully below, it is a specific part of Self emerging from the individual's experiences in the educational contexts. It takes place during the school age, but goes on throughout life, playing a role every time people are involved in educational activities or have to deal with educational contexts.

On a more general level of analysis, school is instead the institution “formally” charged with human development. It is a social organization that, in theory, takes care of—or should take care of (conditional mood is required especially in relation to depressed or developing areas)—an entire generation of children and youths in a given historic and cultural moment. The fundamental construction of human beings as members of society is thus at stake in school and, as a consequence, the construction of collective future directions, the opportunities for positive or negative change, is also at stake. Also in jeopardy is the fundamental play for present and future models of collective life, as well as social rights—for example, the opposition between democratization and privatization affecting the right to access school, a debate taking place in different rich and developing countries. These remarks impose to examine what surrounds the metaphorical balcony from which we are analyzing the work of schooling. Through the balcony, these elements reach school, becoming a fundamental element in constructing school's everyday life and its systems of activity (Engeström, 1987). The first element to be taken into account is the socio-economic dimension of cultural context in which school acts. In this perspective, a historical review of the processes, leading to specific concepts of school and to some outcomes of teaching and learning processes, can be very useful.

Homeostatic Functions of the School

Since the 1960s, extensive scientific literature in development and education psychology stressed the dramatic effects of families' socio-economic conditions on children's school experience. This

scientific production is based on a series of studies in sociology and economics leading to the scathing and common conclusion that—despite an almost universal diffusion of alphabetization and basic education—it is quite impossible, as a matter of fact, to significantly “democratize” the effects of education. It is not possible to provide every student, independently from his own socio-economic origins, actual opportunities of redemption from the original status through education. This is an evidence-based conclusion stressing the critical state of democratic foundations with respect to school. As a matter of fact, despite evident differences in accessing educational resources and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970), many people would claim that these differences are not actually relevant at school. Every student, provided with good will and enough perseverance, will be able to achieve every aspiration. Democratic systems are based on the reassuring claim that, at least in principle, it is actually possible to remove the obstacles causing “socio-economic diversity” in a large number of the population. Education is charged with the fundamental responsibility to put citizens in a position of equal rights and opportunities, by actually supporting those who move from disadvantaged social and economic positions. Unfortunately, although more people can access education, school seems still unable to narrow the socio-economic gap, even in rich countries. Employment statistics still show a clear and direct relationship between type of job and a family's socio-economic resources. In other words, social class of origin, choice of the course of study, and school achievements are so tightly linked that school seems to be an instrument to maintain social stratification (Dei, 2000).

Besides a student's actual starting condition, related to his or her family's social and cultural capital, there is a second level of influence playing a relevant part in enhancing or balancing the effects of social differences in the classroom. The forms of organization established in the classroom lead to different arrangements in teachers' formal power conduct and in students' group informal power relationships (Fele & Paoletti, 2003). These complex processes originate from socio-economic differences—as well as any other difference of age, gender, disability, etc.—anchoring to group dynamics. These dynamics can minimize or, more frequently, radicalize the perception of differences, affecting group inclusion and exclusion processes. Many studies in social psychology (*see* Speltini &

Palmonari, 2007 *for an overview*) stress how this dichotomy—being inside or outside the group—clearly affects the perception of specific individual characteristics. The group tends to “assimilate” members emphasizing common traits and underestimating differences. On the other hand, differences with nonmembers or conflicting out-group members are overestimated (Tajfel, 1981).

Through psycho-social studies, we can more systematically stress common sense extension and depth of socio-economic differences affecting people life, also in so-called welfare societies. Several sharp studies incontestably show the basic privileges provided by some socio-economic conditions, dramatically highlighting inequalities between students in choosing courses of study, achieving educational goals, and accessing jobs. Although for different reasons, teachers also often underestimate the effects of socio-economic conditions on students. For example, the belief that students’ success or failure is mainly related to endogenous and motivational factors is still commonly held (Iannaccone & Marsico, 2007). It is not unusual to say: “He is a child with scarce motivation to learn,” or “He is not inclined for school,” as if learning processes would totally rely on a sort of magical energy someone has and someone else does not have. In this case, researchers argue that people use this *gift theory* (Mugny & Carugati, 1985) to account for the extraordinary variability of individuals in achieving educational goals. The impossibility to unequivocally attribute success—or failure—to clear and identifiable causes, would lead people to identify elements of individual conduct (e.g., will, specific flairs), or, at worst, of familiar behaviour (“with that family, he can’t get far!”). Teachers instead seem to turn to the gift theory for different reasons, as far as they have a specific experience of learning processes. They use this argument in defense of their own professional identity.

The teacher’s profession is actually directed toward mass alphabetization and education of future citizens, despite challenges related to socio-economic and cultural origin. In everyday life, he must instead cope with an obvious sequence of failures. It does not frequently happen, as it can be argued, that students with low socio-economic origins totally recover the initial gap. Thus, teachers must cope with the rigidity and immobility of social reality much more than they would expect with respect to their job. This dramatically questions professional principles (especially for novice teachers and those worn out by difficult experiences),

activating (according to some social psychologists of development) a sort of “defensive” representation, realized in the “individualistic” gift theory. The attribution of failure to a student’s specific characteristics becomes a teacher’s vindication.

Fortunately, a large part of modern education psychology provides alternative explications to failure, by contextualizing it and restoring the complex of human experience as a whole (Carugati & Selleri, 2005). Some just point out the relationship between failure and socio-economic variables, while others stress how learning is an interpersonal process by nature. In the latter category of studies, failure is identified with specific social skills, especially argumentative ones (Muller Mirza, Perret-Clermont, Tartas, & Iannaccone, 2009). Thus, the problem shifts from the student’s cognitive and motivational fund to the ability of establishing relationships with others—in situations in which confronting ideas and points of view leads him or her to become aware of the necessary operations to solve problems—enhancing a cognitive progress (Iannaccone, 2010). In the same socio-constructivist direction, there are other interesting perspectives referring to the so-called “Brunerian culturalist.” view Bruner (1990, 1996) outlines an idea of cognitive and learning processes as a construction of meaning with respect to their social and cultural frameworks. Common sense, on one hand, and “contextualist” researchers, on the other hand, are a good example—even if not exhaustive—of the numerous ideas of school circulating within society. These ideas can significantly affect educational policy and practices, on a national and local level. These different visions lead to conflicting and incompatible conclusions also concerning the problem of the actual democratization of educational action. As already mentioned, among the more diffused representations, a naïve vision of school certainly exists, which overestimates positive effects making unclear the latent socio-economic variables. This perspective considers school a pathway to individual and social redemption without manifest rifts. A sort of relationship between students’ “will” and success in study is thus established. This idea has been fully shared in both the scientific community and everyday discourses. It is however undeniable that education has actually improved life conditions of large populations.

Maintaining Status-Quo of Society

Sociology and psychology have shown the less simplistic and reassuring side of the functioning

of educational institutions. Even before psychology of education stressed the social and contextual dimension of learning and failure (Daniels, 2011; Perret-Clermont, 2008; Carugati & Selleri, 2005), sociology already described a school slightly differing from common sense's idealized and stereotyped image. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1970) shook school's traditional image. School is not just a place in which knowledge is transmitted, but also a context in which social inequalities are reproduced. According to these French scholars, the fundamental element of social distinction concerns a sort of circularity of socio-economic characteristics. Inequalities in parents' economic and cultural resources and the different place they occupy in social division of labor originate nursing practices and interaction modalities that will provide children a sort of educational legacy with which they participate to the educational experiences. These instruments will vary according to the social and economic context of origin. Without generalizing, these differences will "tend" to foster students' behaviors and learning styles that do not always fit with the aims and activities of school. This will inevitably lead students to different forms of integration and assessment outcomes related to their "suitability" with respect to the educational context's features. The following step can be easily argued: a not very brilliant student will probably be directed toward vocational training and will have more limited access to job markets. It is understood that these forms of social distinction do not deal very much with the actual potentialities of students. The educational context, in this type of analysis, is considered as a filter definitely based upon psychosocial characteristics of students that are, more or less implicitly, directed to predetermined careers. Through these clear remarks, sociological analysis provides valuable elements to fully clarify the educational institutions' role—beyond proclamations and theoretical goals—in "validating" socio-economic differences. However, on this level of analysis, sociological perspective runs the risk of providing a fatalistic and unmodifiable picture, if not supplemented by further analysis of real social dynamics taking place in educational contexts.

Actually, there is a potential margin of action also on the level of classroom activities. Preliminarily, it is worthwhile to observe that every form of social distinction has correspondence in students' communicative interactions. As a matter of fact, the classroom actually is a social system supported by both formal

and informal relationships (Daniels, 1995, 2004; Fele & Paoletti, 2003). In this context, different types of communicative interactions are regulatory elements par excellence. They define and maintain order—not necessarily that expected by the institution—but also to foster potential change in social organization. Communicative interactions—as argued by contemporary communication theories—just marginally correspond to the typical metaphor of information transmission. Communicating is, first of all, to share meaning and to establish a common ground in order to cooperate or to conflict, to establish social borders between two or more individuals. From this point of view, language can be actually considered an activity that is not limited to information transmission. Power relationships, personal and professional identities, etc. are equally at stake. Language plays a crucial role in classroom life. Because of its malleability and sensitivity to the contexts of use—especially social and professional—it is often indicated as the key factor to account for disadvantage and socio-economic differences. From this starting point, pioneering sociolinguistics study the relationship between social belonging and linguistic competence. Basil Bernstein's approach (1971) to socio-linguistic disadvantage is one of the best-known and most-criticized ones. He attempts to analyze the mechanisms of reproduction, maintenance, and change of social order through language and symbolic systems used in families and schools. Bernstein's fundamental point is that language and symbolic systems in the family can dramatically diverge from those in the school. He believes that every social context establishes which meaning must be linguistically actualized, also determining which syntactic and lexical choice can be made. Individuals trained in specific contexts find themselves in a brand new situation at school—from the sociolinguistic point of view—probably facing difficulties of adaptation affecting performance. This can trigger a process of marginalization or even exclusion by the institution. Although Bernstein's ideas remarkably contributed to the debate about the role played by so-called socio-linguistic codes in integrating students into classroom social life and discourses, they present several critical aspects. The socio-linguistic code's idea itself has been widely criticized because it is difficult to be defined and operationalized. Actually, research demonstrated inadequacy of some aspects of Bernstein's theory. For instance, the relationship between socio-linguistic codes and abstract references has been widely

falsified. Dialects—widely used by lower classes—against Bernstein’s expectations, are very elaborate at the linguistic level and fully usable in describing and manipulating abstract meanings. After observation studies in the classroom (Edwards, 1990), findings demonstrate that the problem of communicative disadvantage—and probably other forms of marginalization—is not related to the availability of socio-linguistic codes, rather to the acceptance of a new system of rules—also linguistic ones—characterizing classroom context and diverging, sometimes dramatically, from everyday life.

Focus thus shifts from the idea of inadequate socio-linguistic competence to the idea—much more complex and probably able to account for many forms of disadvantage—of specificity in processes of meaning attribution to activity. As Iannaccone (2010) reports, if cognitive activity cannot be separated by the meaning that individuals attribute to situations in which they act, it is convincing that some students’ marginalization and exclusion processes are rather triggered by how they interpret learning situations and the social system below.

Some “Practical” Implications

Planning every educational activity in this specific area of interest starts from a preliminary remark: evaluating the impact of students’ socio-economic origin on class life and analyzing how it is perceived by the different actors of the learning community.

A first important element is the so-called teachers’ folk psychology (Bruner, 1996). Bruner’s statement makes clear, beyond any doubt, how much educational and professional activity is directed by adults’ representations, namely by teachers. If some of these systems of beliefs can hide the effects of socio-economic differences or tend to transfer the problem through individualistic and de-contextualized explanations, it is quite evident that educational acting will be ineffective, despite the best intentions. In order to actually cope with potentially negative effects of socio-economic differences in the classroom, it is required to start by fostering teachers to become aware of the real problem, causes, and consequences. Teachers’ systems of representations play a fundamental role in constructing and reinforcing teachers’ professional identities (Iannaccone, Tateo, Mollo, & Marsico, 2008). They are “constituent” elements of what can be defined as the teacher’s *Educational Self* (Iannaccone & Marsico, 2007).

For this reason they can seem like “proof” against change. Rather, in presence of a threat to professional situations—like those challenging teachers on the level of social reputation and salary—these elements can get even more radical.

If teachers’ system of representations is the first element to be taken into account when planning effective educational strategies, the second element should necessarily concern teachers’ and students’ “perception” of classroom social life. It is quite clear, on this point, that the different socio-economic origins are easily perceivable in the classroom. Despite schools’ attempts to minimize the display of socio-economic differences, all the actors of the learning community are in some way aware of the distribution of economic and social resources among peers. Beyond external cues, linguistic marks and interaction styles in the classroom constantly recall students’ social and cultural origins. Besides, in the case of immigrant children, these indicators are further emphasized by the cultural framework they refer to in everyday rituals and relating to the educational system. Social psychology has clearly demonstrated that perceptive availability of such similarities and differences generates social categorization. Groups of students will then be formed with respect to these social indicators. Even the groups’ “entry rituals” will be based on the ability of the single student to show behaviors and lifestyles fulfilling a group’s expectations. Thus, it is useful for teachers to monitor spontaneous social groups’ architecture in the classroom. It can be useful to recall Sherif and Sherif’s experiment (1953, 1961)—veritable milestones of social psychology—clearly showing how it is possible to act upon group dynamics, establishing conditions for competitive and cooperative climates to emerge. Although this experiment is just one of numerous possibilities to tune group climate, at the same time it represents a clear example of group management in education. It also makes clear how negatively emphasizing class differences is always a problem that must not be underestimated. Conflict is a “natural” modality human beings use also to assert their identity. The “negative” radicalization of social fabric can make this process extremely dangerous and able to interfere with every educational initiative, if not bearing in mind its nature.

It is quite evident that an in-depth knowledge of the wider social phenomena such as in-group/out-group processes or socio-economic characteristics of individuals is absolutely essential. These dimensions regulate everyday life in different social contexts in

which the actors are involved. They are reflected in the work of schooling, showing a clear overlap between inside and outside the school.

What Happens on the Balcony: Looking at Crossing Boundaries

As we have argued in the previous pages, a number of elements belonging to the wider social and cultural contexts are not alien to the way the school works in practice; on the contrary they act as catalyzers, providing contextual support, which leads to certain form of schooling rather than others. These sociocultural dimensions (socio-economic levels, ingenuous or expert theories on education, the school's representations, etc.) pass metaphorically through the balcony and enter the territory of the school.

Studying what happens on the border between inside and outside the school means first paying attention to the intersections it has with other life contexts relevant to the development and education, first and foremost the family. The relevance of "crossing boundaries" and of intercontextual dynamics between family and school are presented in this section.

The crossing boundaries phenomenon (Marsico, Komatsu, & Iannaccone, in press) became evident when we consider the contact's points with school and family. In fact, it is possible to consider boundary encounters, such as meetings and conversations, and events that provide connections between systems. That was precisely the focus of a research project carried out by the present authors that tried to describe what happens when the family goes to the school to receive the evaluation of their child during the school-family meetings³ (Iannaccone & Marsico, 2007).

The aim of this research was to explore the social space emerging from the interaction between family and school. In the situations under examination, we try to understand how *school culture* comes into contact with *family culture* via a dynamic of delimitation of competences over the key issue of children's education. At this level of analysis, we were particularly interested in the interactional activities and in the conversational strategies that schools and families adopt during the "school report cards delivery" event. This kind of encounter, as in any social space, causes an adjustment between the participants, who will eventually converge or diverge in their evaluation of the child. Metaphorically speaking, meetings take place just on the balcony. School invites family into its own "territory," creating a

temporary shared space (functional, not structural, balcony) that is a prominent extension of the institutional wall. It can be assumed that school, in this way, intends to promote a satisfactory home-school interaction, that is, surely, an essential component of effective education (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Henderson & Berla, 1994). The reason for this occurring in a specific space and time, decided by the school, is a different question. What would happen if the school communicated the child's evaluation by formal letter, e-mail, press release on local TV, or via the Internet (allowing, in such a way, the comparison of student's performances all over the world)?

If school intends to support parents' involvement in children's education and fruitful family-school relationships, why not organising meetings with parents at home? What would parent-teacher meetings be like at home? After all, this is not uncommon for other professionals like doctors or social workers. Why not for teachers? How would teachers be received at home? Which forms of social interaction would take place and with what effect on the relationship between the teacher, parents, and child? Would teachers keep the same institutional function even in a different social structure?

School instead decides to invite parents, emulating a certain kind of informality. This informality, however, is only partial (a formal informality). Encounters are placed into an official context, organized according to specific institutional rules. Even though it is a balcony, a border zone, it is still the school's balcony, that parents can enter tip-toeing, feeling uneasy, or on the contrary with confidence, arrogance, and self-assurance. What social rules, instead, would modulate the school-family encounters if they happened in an informal place such as the bar on the corner where parents and teacher, drinking a coffee and discussing the child's school performance (an informal formality)? The articulation between "formality/informality" and "openness/closedness" is also evident in another school event that occurs at the end of the school year, when students' assessments are put up on the wall of the school's entrance-hall. It is an open space, but institutionally characterized, yet another of the school's border zones. Why are some ways of communicating adopted, while others are avoided or judged not admissible? What are the effects on school-family communication and on social regulation of meetings? Although we are aware of the several possible alternatives to

communicate, in the study hereafter presented, we focus on a particular point of intersection between family and school.

The Family Goes to School

The school and family cultures, in the meeting situation constituted by the presentation of the school report, will necessarily have to come into contact in a micro-systemic space. If in daily life family and school communicate almost exclusively via the child/pupil, in this case the meeting is face-to-face, and the respective representations of the child/pupil enter into direct contact in a conversational space. From an ecological and cultural viewpoint, we could say that the “report delivery” event represents an occasion in which the family micro-system and the school micro-system meet/clash, highlighting the meso-systemic connections (both the successful and fruitful ones and the unsuccessful or fruitless ones) between two life contexts of key importance in one’s upbringing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). During this appointment, two cultural worlds come into contact, each one with its specific sets of beliefs and organization, specific social climates and viewpoints (which can sometimes differ greatly, such as on the educational processes, the child/pupil’s growth and the management of the adult-child relationship). The school-family meeting is thus a critical event, not only for the reasons mentioned above, but also for the meanings it acquires in the experience of the actors involved. Suffice it to consider how the school’s evaluation of their child may be perceived by the parents as an evaluation of their own educational skills, or how the process of the definition of a pupil’s identity is strictly connected with his/her school experience, and the value that school success or failure acquires in relation to a positive or negative definition of the Self (as discussed in the next pages).

In the school-family meeting, the main conversational topic should be, at least in theory, the student. Again in theory, teachers meet parents to present them the results of their child’s learning in school. The meeting may end (as it sometimes does) with a few laconic exchanges from which the parents are supposed to grasp all the necessary information to understand whether their children are “good” or “bad” students. The few laconic exchanges should also allow parents to “justify,” when required, their children’s inadequacies at school. What really happens, albeit within a relatively short time span, is much more complicated than it may seem (Iannaccone & Marsico, 2007).

First of all, during the meeting two or more adults, both of whom are responsible in different ways for a child’s education, are compared, together with their different perspectives on education that somehow compete for the privilege of “having their say” about a human being at a critical stage of his/her life. In this one-to-one match, the school should represent a public institution and as such it is a sort of an “official voice.” The family, in the least problematic cases, will spontaneously agree with this representation; in the most difficult cases (for instance, when the child does not embody the good student prototype and his/her parents accuse the teachers of being the main reason for this), it will defend its own conflicting positions.

The idea of the school’s “official voice” is certainly an unsuitable generalization of concrete observed conversational dynamics. Indeed, teachers follow an enormous variety of educational models, which are only partially in line with syllabus indications and social, cultural, and scientific expectations. As studies on professional identities and sociocultural dimensions in working organizations have clearly highlighted, what the teacher does is the result of a process of adaptation with unforeseeable outcomes (Iannaccone et al., 2008). What makes this process difficult to foresee is the co-participation of elements of the teachers’ human and professional biographies with the sociocultural conditions of the working contexts. From a more strictly scientific viewpoint, this plurality of “voices” is identified as the expression of the various social representations co-existing in professional contexts as in any other social context. This obviously increases the complexity of defining the “success/failure at school” (Monteil, 1989) category when the issue at stake is the outcome of a school-family meeting.

In the school context, with its institutionally “ratified” rules, the definitions of “good pupil” and “bad pupil” will in any case be placed within specific traditions (in this school, children have always studied hard and obtained good results when they went on to high school), specific conducts, and adjustments. Although “modulated” by their belonging to the institutions, the categories of people involved in the issue of success at school represent the result of a complex social process, influenced by a number of key elements (Ligorio & Pontecorvo, 2010).

On a broader level of analysis, when looking at a school’s organizational features and cultural traditions, some elements contributing to the students’ success/failure can be identified. Every school, as a

social and cultural context, is a space where representations are elaborated. It could be considered as a social place in which different actors, with different roles and different life experiences, live together, albeit often unwillingly. As in any other community, also at school these actors produce shared narratives, use gossip to maintain the social order, give credit to various “legends” about what apparently happened at that school in the past, about its pupils’ (positively or negatively) sealed fate, about this or that teacher being good or bad. In other words, a school is also a set of narratives (Bruner, 1996) that in turn generate expectations and modulate the behavior of the actors who carry out their daily activities there. Teachers themselves have specific representations of their work in the different school contexts. Families also often choose the school for their child according to its potential to fulfill their expectations about what the child is capable of and what, in their opinion, he/she should do when he/she “grows up.” This crossfire of teachers’ professional identities and parents’ representations of success heavily contributes to creating very different expectations concerning schools. This will influence, and not negligibly, the students’ success/failure parameters and the nature of their education. In this way, school as a social, complex context will represent a significant framework for a punctual definition of the notion of academic success/failure. For instance, when a teacher defines his/her students as a “bad” or a “good” class, he/she is probably using a Lewinian-type category. Besides, how could he/she otherwise say that, on a given day or moment of the school year, his/her class seems particularly “bright” or extraordinarily “dull”? By adopting Lewin’s notion of group, every student in his/her daily class life, beyond his/her individual distinctive features (which no psychology would completely deny), is also an element of some more complex interdependence. To use a metaphor frequently employed by cultural psychologists, we could consider him/her “a thread in a complex weft.” Being “interwoven” with the other actors in the educational context, he/she necessarily lives inside a sort of social polyphony, where the sense of his/her acting will depend on the interactions between his/her individuality and the social contexts in which he/she experiences his/her daily interactions. The research focuses on the articulation between the participants’ representations and interactional activities. This methodological choice allowed us to explain several consistencies between school/family meeting management (by parents),

the family’s perceptions of the school’s success/failure and the family’s socio-economic origins.

TYPES OF INTERACTIONS, FAMILY’S SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS, AND SCHOOL RESULTS

Using an ethnographic approach, several meetings between family and school were observed and audio/video-recorded. More precisely, 22 families were involved (and 26 pupils, since some of the families observed had more than one child at the school). To conduct this study, the parents, with their child, went to school by appointment to meet the teacher who presented them with the child’s school report. The meeting was also attended (though at this time on a basically “nonparticipating” role) by a researcher, who audio-taped and took note of any potentially significant events occurring during the specific meeting. Besides the recording of meetings between family members and the teacher in charge of presenting the report card, the research comprised a second phase, featuring a semi-structured interview. The interview’s general aim is to analyze the voice of the family immediately after the report card delivery ritual. What is the parents’ evaluation of their child’s school report? Was it what they expected? And what do they hold responsible for success in school? And for failure? And, in turn, what explanations can the child/pupil provide for the marks received? The interview, which was entirely filmed, was conducted by a researcher who had a conversation with the family.

The analysis of the transcripts and the field notes show three main modalities of interactional activities. We will see that these activities are related to family’s socio-economic level and to the student’s school results. In fact, during the first analysis of the school-family meetings, in 42.3% of cases the management of the meeting involved parents and teachers converging toward consensual modalities (*alliances*). However, in 34.6% of cases, the family seems to comply with the image of the pupil proposed by the teacher (*acquiescences*). Finally, conflicts, in a more or less latent way, affected 23.1% of the meetings (*oppositions*). By comparing the frequency of these modalities with the socio-economic level of the family, we obtain an interesting result. Alliances, for instance, were never observed during meetings with families of low socio-economic level. They did, however appear in 50% of all meetings with medium-level families and in the 60% of families with a high socio-economic level. In a similar way,

opposition was more frequent for the higher socio-economic levels (from the 17% of low-level families to the 30% of high-level families). Conversely, the interaction modalities of acquiescence are very frequent on a low socio-economic level (83%) and are almost negligible at high levels. It would seem reasonable to explain these differences with at least two types of factors. The first factor could be related to a type of “cultural capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). Considering that high socio-economic levels generally correspond to a thicker and better-constructed educational experience, it is possible that the medium- and high-level families feel more “akin” to the school discourse and are better able to cope with the teachers. These families are more familiar with the typical communication tools of the school context, and they have a greater proximity to the sociocultural origin of the teachers. The second factor that could explain the different modalities of meeting management is related to a sort of self-perception of the social asymmetry in that relationship. Acquiescence, a passive relationship modality, indicates a clear acceptance of the teachers’ comments by the families of a lower socio-economic level.

Predictably, the dynamics of school-family meetings is also related to the student’s success/failure. In particular, the alliance is more typical of the discussions about successful situations (75%). Acquiescence, on the other hand, is more frequent during the discussion of students’ failures (57%). Typically, a “good” student facilitates the agreement of the evaluation between the family and the school. Instead, a problematic student could be the “stake” of conflictual dynamics (29%), or alternatively (and this is the more frequent case) of forms of passive acceptance of the evaluation (57%) by the parents. In fact, opposition and acquiescence, taking into account the data mentioned above, seem to be the modalities used to cope with the student’s failure related to the socio-economic origin of the family. In this sense, since failure goes along with oppositional and acquiescent forms of interaction, it is probable that the different frequency of these modalities can be traced back to the social level of the families. In particular, we saw that opposition and acquiescence tend to be respectively associated with medium-high and low socio-economic levels. To better contextualize the discourse, it is appropriate to clarify the relationship, which is also reported in literature (Schizzerotto, 1988; Ballarino & Cecchi, 2006), between the academic performance of students and the socio-economic level of their families. Actually, the highest

percentage of the students with good results at school comes from medium and high socio-economic levels (60%). Conversely, the percentage of failures is higher among students of a low socio-economic level (about 83%). Taking into account the broader category of “troubled experiences at school” (that include every type of socio-relational and cognitive deficit), this relationship is even more pronounced. All the students from families with a low socio-economic level have some kind of trouble at school, compared with half of the students from medium-level families and the 60% of students from high-level families.

Opposition, Alliance, and Acquiescence in the Family-School Interactions

The following are some examples of meetings between families and the teacher, who was appointed by the class board to deliver the school report; the examples concern three kinds of interaction events: opposition, alliance, and acquiescence.

In particular, the meetings developed in the form of oppositions, alliances, and acquiescences depending on the goals’ orientation. In other words, this kind of encounter assumes different social configurations depending on the convergent or divergent participants’ evaluation of the student’s result’s. When school and family agreed on the child’s evaluation, they easily shared viewpoints. On the contrary, when the academic assessment represented, for instance, a threat to the educational choices that a specific family considered necessary, more dynamic and conflictual communications emerged. Therefore, the divergent goals’ orientation, mainly observed in the opposition in family-school interaction, stressed the communication breakdown between teachers and parents and allowed us to understand the details of such events and the arguments evoked by participants with respect to, for example, how the problem is presented, who is responsible for it, what has to be done in order to solve it and by whom.

OPPOSITION

Meeting #1

Participants: Teacher, Father, (boy) Pupil

The school-family meeting involved the teacher, the 13-year-old student (attending the third year of Italian middle school⁴) and his 46-year-old father, an employee in a private company.

The student’s family is made up of his father, mother, and an elder (18-year-old) sister.

The student's school performance, according to his teachers, is just around the pass mark, and he is weak in technical subjects. The teacher thinks that the student needs to concentrate better and that his parents should monitor him more closely. His father seems to take this statement as a criticism and answers back, stating that, in order to grow up well, a person needs to have the time "to do everything" (e.g., school, fun, sports, etc.) and that school must guarantee students the chance to express their potential in many different fields.

In the opening part of the conversation, the teacher highlights the boy's weakness in technical subjects, which he considers a "serious thing," with a generally positive attitude. At the same time, he underlines (confirming his implicit "opinion" of the student) how his physical education performance is "good," while his behavior

does not exactly fit "our orientation" (the teachers' ideas). The teacher's opening approach and his choice of points to highlight primarily result from his general opinion that the student is distracted by his after-school sports activities. In this opening part, the father seems to accept the teacher's explanations.

In a subsequent phase, which constitutes a turning point in the conversation, the teacher, while trying to identify the reasons for the student's bad performance in certain subjects, specifically addresses his family (I think there is also a problem with being regularly followed at home). The conversation's main topic then becomes that of time management: from the time management of class activities, the conversation, partly because of the parent's reply, will gradually move on to time management in the boy's overall education.

Excerpt 1: Meeting #1

English translation:

11. **TEACHER:** so this is it, quite correct (.) in his interpersonal relationships (.) he is sociable and cooperates with his classmates, takes an active part in school life (.) but he is not very constructive (2.0) **I think here there is a problem=with=being=regularly followed also at home** and (1.0) I mean here we basically mean that he (.) when he organizes himself he must use his time better (.) and he must=learn=how=he must=do it because> [...]

12. **FATHER: to the end there are time limits:::**

13. **TEACHER:** that is not all (.) there are many other things (.) for example it is important to not merely count on one's memory but to try and understand and try and :::

14. **FATHER:** >activate a logical reasoning process<

15. **TEACHER:** always try to provide an explanation (.) dispel all doubts (.) and ask the teacher in order to (.) eliminate some (.) situations=to=be able=then=to avoid=continually=slowing down=the learning process (.) that here we can say is on track (1.5) the teaching objectives set have been partially reached (1.0) he attended the extra maths course (.) and passed it and=this=is certainly a=positive=fact=because (.) before this extra course he::: didn't have this current passion for studying maths too (.) now he seems to be:::

Italian original:

11. **DOCENTE:** per cui rimane questo abbastanza corretto (.) nei rapporti interpersonali (.) è socievole e collabora con i compagni partecipa alla vita scolastica in modo attivo (.) ma poco costruttivo (2.0) **credo che qui ci sia il problema=di=una =verifica continua anche a casa** e (1.0) cioè qui vogliamo dire praticamente che lui (.) quando organizza deve meglio spendere i tempi (.) e deve=vedere=come=deve=fare [...]

12. **PADRE: alla conclusione ci vogliono dei tempi:::**

13. **DOCENTE:** non solo questo (.) tantissime altre cose (.) per esempio non affidarsi alla memoria cercare di capire e cercare di:::

14. **PADRE:** >attivare un processo logico di ragionamento<

15. **DOCENTE:** cercare sempre di elargire la spiegazione (.) mettere da parte i dubbi (.) e chiedere all'insegnante affinché (.) vengano eliminate certe (.) situazioni=per=poter=poi=non=accumulare =ritardi=nel processo di apprendimento (.) che qua diciamo che è regolare (1.5) gli obiettivi didattici programmati sono stati raggiunti in modo parziale (1.0) ha partecipato al corso di recupero di matematica (.) con sufficiente risultato e=questo=qua sicuramente è un=fatto=positivo=perché (.) prima di questo corso di recupero lui::: non aveva ancora questa affezione a studiare pure la matematica (.) pare che adesso stia:::

Starting from turn #16, the father adopts a true defensive strategy, using a defensive argument first, and then a second, more generic one, showing a specific concept of education that differs from that of the school. This is the moment in which the clash between school and family culture first becomes evident. At turn #18, the father also refers to

intergenerational differences (“and this is let’s say a problem with I think 99% of young people today”). The father, by using specific and detailed arguments, *contrasts* his way of educating his son (based on trust and respect for his autonomy) with the aims of the school. This is a good example of what we intend as *opposition*.

Excerpt 2: Meeting #1

English translation:

16. FATHER: >I if I must< (.) express a global opinion=*we=at=home=do follow him we have* (1.0) the difficulties I think all parents have (.) these days (.) because this is nor[mal]

17. TEACHER: [yes]

18. FATHER: >the thing that< (3.0) as a parent I must say the truth not that I justify my son’s attitude on the contrary I am very critical when he doesn’t apply himself< **and this is let’s say a problem with I think 99% of young people today** (.) with whom we have contact (.) **I told him that in my opinion to be complete one must find the time to do everything (.) he must find the time to study (.) time to have fun (.) because if not if a boy were focused only on one thing (.) I mean studying (.) he would also have limits (.) I think he has also [some potential]**

19. TEACHER: [potential yes]

20. FATHER: speaking as a parent I’ll tell you this (.) in my opinion if I notice (1.0) well (.) >maybe sometimes today as school doesn’t exist anymore< (.) that is when we used to go to school school was something positive (.) back then either you did it or you did it and that was it (.) **today I think everybody has great potential (.) but >we must have the ability to let them express it<**

21. TEACHER: **this is another reason why there have to be time limits too (.) the time he has (.) that he spends at home (.) if he [only spends it playing football]**

22. FATHER: [I’ll tell you something]

23. TEACHER: there is a time for football (.) but it can’t be football all day so that the thing also continues::: into the next day the match they’ve played they talk about it again the following day and then it’s basically all about the match (.) that once it’s started it goes on and on:::

Italian original:

16. PADRE: >io se devo< (.) esprimere un giudizio globale=*noi=in=casa=lo seguiamo abbiamo* (1.0) le difficoltà che secondo me hanno tutti i genitori (.) nel tempo moderno (.) perché è un fatto nor[male]

17. DOCENTE: [sì]

18. PADRE: >quello che< (3.0) io come genitore devo dire la verità non è che giustifico l’atteggiamento di mio figlio anzi sono estremamente critico nel momento in cui lui non si applica< **e questo diciamo che è un difetto penso del 99% dei ragazzi di oggi** (.) con i quali noi abbiamo contatti (.) **io a lui gli ho detto che secondo me una persona per essere completa deve trovare tempo per fare tutto (.) deve trovare tempo per studiare (.) tempo per il divertimento (.) perché altrimenti se un ragazzo fosse solo monotematico (.) cioè verso lo studio (.) avrebbe anche dei limiti (.) io credo che lui abbia anche [delle potenz]**

19. DOCENTE: [potenzialità sì]

20. PADRE: detto da genitore vi dico questo (.) secondo me se io noto (1.0) ecco (.) >forse delle volte oggi siccome non esiste più la scuola< (.) cioè quando noi andavamo a scuola c’era una scuola in positivo (.) allora tu o lo facevi o lo facevi basta (.) oggi secondo me **hanno tutti delle grosse potenzialità (.) però >noi dobbiamo avere la capacità di farglielo esprimere<**

21. DOCENTE: **per ciò ci vorranno anche dei tempi (.) lui il tempo che ha (.) che spende a casa (.) se lo [spende solamente per il calcio]**

22. PADRE: [io vi dico una cosa]

23. DOCENTE: si dà uno spazio per il calcio (.) ma non deve essere calcio tutta la giornata che poi la cosa continua anche::: il giorno dopo la partita che hanno fatto la raccontano anche il giorno dopo e praticamente diventa tutta una partita (.) che comincia e si va avanti così:::

At turn #29, the teacher once again tries to return to his theory that the boy is “too busy” with his after-school activities. Once again, the father opposes his specific view of the problem, referring to his condition as a worker in the private sector,

where “you must always be active and operative.” At turn #30, he identifies a possible solution in the democratization of the teacher-pupil relationship, on which the “pleasure of studying” should depend.

Excerpt 3: Meeting #1

English translation:

29. TEACHER: also because they are busy with so many other activities in the afternoon

30. FATHER: no Sir=not on this (.) I can assure you that I also said something else to him (.) you were talking about time management (.) I'm 46 now and when I am out working (1.0) for my company (.) they teach time management I mean they tell me there is time to do everything because I work in the private sector =they=make us=work=twenty=hours=a day (1.0) and they want us to be always (1.0) active and operative (.) the basic problem here in my opinion is exchange (1.0) I mean you must have a more democratic exchange with the students meaning that basically the students must learn the pleasure of studying (.) this is the crucial thing

Italian original:

29. DOCENTE: anche perché sono presi da tante altre attività pomeridiane

30. PADRE: professore no=no su questo (.) vi posso assicurare che io a lui ho detto anche un'altra cosa (.) lei diceva la gestione del tempo (.) io oggi ho 46 anni e quando vado a fare lavori (1.0) per la mia azienda a me (.) insegnano la gestione del tempo cioè a me dicono c'è tempo per fare tutto perché io lavoro nel privato=ci=fanno=lavorare=venti=ore=al giorno (1.0) e vogliono che noi siamo sempre (1.0) attivi e operativi (.) il problema di base che c'è secondo me il confronto (1.0) cioè voi dovete avere un confronto un po' più democratico coi ragazzi nel senso che praticamente i ragazzi devono capire il piacere di studiare (.) questa è la cosa fondamentale

AQ2

From turn #37, the teacher's words betray his personal view of the aims of the school. In his opinion, parents' requests for sports and music activities would represent a real problem (“and where is

the school in all this, I wonder”). This educational vision, reminiscing about a sort of “withdrawal into tradition,” highlights another element of variability in the school-family relationship.

Excerpt 4: Meeting #1

English translation:

37. TEACHER: it may not be your case but some parents::: come to tell us that afterwards they have to go to the gym because they have scoliosis

38. FATHER: no=no, absolutely no way:::

39. TEACHER: they must study music because they like music and where is the school in all this I wonder and they leave it to the school to deal with the problem

Italian original:

37. DOCENTE: non sarà il caso vostro però alcuni genitori::: vengono a dire che poi deve andare in palestra perché ha la scoliosi

38. PADRE: no=no, assolutamente non esiste:::

39. DOCENTE: deve fare musica perché piace la musica e la scuola dico io quando viene e lasciano il problema esclusivamente alla scuola

ALLIANCE

Meeting #9

Participants: Teacher (female), student (female), Father, Mother.

The participants are the teacher, the 11-year-old female student attending the first year of middle

school, her father, a 40-year-old bus driver, and her mother, a 37-year-old hairdresser. The student's family is composed of the father, the mother, the student, a younger sister (age 9 years) and a younger brother (age 8 years). During the meeting, the teacher starts the discussion by presenting the new

report card, introduced by a recent school reform, to the parents. In a second phase, the teacher deals with the positive assessment of the student's performance and her participation in class. The core of the conversation (reported in the transcript

below) seems to focus on the "transition" from primary school to the first year of middle school and its effects on the pupil's school experience. The school-family alliance appears to be another core element of the conversation.

Excerpt 4: Meeting #9

English translation:

47. TEACHER: then:: let's say she attended (.) she applied herself (.) she understood that (.) the situations (were) (.) well she realized quite quickly that things were different (.) that:: the approach was different (.) that behavior was different (.) maybe because she has a family behind her (.) quite simply. (.) that is I assume that are kids aged ten=eleven years and (.) if they have a choice between (.) playing and working (.) they prefer to play so when>they don't have (.) some constraints< that is the family on one side and the school on the other side to guide them (.) it's clear that they can easily [lose::]

48. FATHER: [it's she had this passage]

49. TEACHER: if we could (.) but how (.) if we could (.) have a walk (.) there's the sense of responsibility ok

50. MOTHER: but at this [age]

51. TEACHER: [there is not]

52. MOTHER: [unfortunately there's not]

53. TEACHER: [there's not] that's why you need family and school (.) that is two entities leading them and guiding them

54. MOTHER: definitely

55. TEACHER: then they realize they can't move just within such [constraints]

56. MOTHER: [definitely]

57. TEACHER: so when there's a cooperation between school and family things (.) generally go

58. MOTHER: go better

59. TEACHER: go better (.) maybe let's say go better in the sense that to some extent: some problems are overcome: and it is also clear that when they improve they can improve even more ((laughs)) well I mean ((laughs)) and in this case she has done just that: demonstrated this situation (.) she applied herself (.) at the beginning she was quite uncertain (.) now she starts to chime in a bit too much raising her little finger (.) but anyway

Italian original:

47. DOCENTE: quindi:: diciamo che lei ha seguito (.) si è impegnata (.) ha capito che (.) le situazioni (erano) (.) ecco quello che ha capito abbastanza rapidamente che le situazioni erano diverse (.) che:: l'approccio era diverso (.) che il comportamento era diverso (.) forse perché ha la famiglia alle spalle (.) detto molto francamente. (.) cioè io parto dal presupposto che questi sono ragazzi comunque di dieci=undici anni (.) e che fra (.) il gioco e il lavoro (.) preferiscono il gioco per cui nel momento in cui >non hanno (.) dei paletti< cioè la famiglia da una parte e la scuola dall'altra che l'indirizzi (.) è chiaro che possono tranquillamente [perdere::]

48. PADRE: °[ci sta' che ha avuto questo passaggio]°

49. DOCENTE: se potessimo (.) ma come (.) se potessimo (.) andare a fare una passeggiata (.) là c'è il senso di responsabilità e va beh

50. MADRE: ma a questa [età]

51. DOCENTE: [là non esiste]

52. MADRE: [purtroppo non esiste]

53. DOCENTE: [non esiste] ecco perché ci vuole la famiglia e la scuola (.) cioè due entità che li guidano e li indirizzano

54. MADRE: sicuramente

55. DOCENTE: per cui loro si rendono conto che loro non possono muoversi se non all'interno di quei [paletti]

56. MADRE: [sicuramente]

57. DOCENTE: e quindi allora quando c'è questa sinergia tra scuola e famiglia le cose (.) in genere vanno

58. MADRE: vanno meglio

59. DOCENTE: vanno bene (.) forse diciamo che vanno meglio nel senso che a un certo punto: certi problemi si superano: e poi è chiaro che quando vanno meglio poi possono andare anche meglio ((ride)) cioè voglio dire ((ride)) e in questo caso lei ha dimostrato questa situazione (.) si è impegnata (.) i primi tempi era abbastanza incerta (.) adesso comincia a intervenire un poco po' troppo con quel ditino alzato (.) ma comunque tutto sommato

ACQUIESCENCE

Meeting #16

Participants: Teacher (female), Student (female), Mother

The participants are the teacher, the 12-year-old student attending the second year of middle school and her 40-year-old mother, who is unemployed.

The student's family also includes a 45-year-old father, a blue-collar worker, and an older brother (age 16 years). The teacher presents the assessment of the student whose marks are poor in a number of subjects. The mother never replies to the presentation of the report card and the meeting ends in just a few turns.

Excerpt 5: Meeting #16

English translation:

1. **TEACHER:** well well >we already talked with you madam< so you already know the situation (.). eh::: (.). let's give the marks in detail::: (.). let's say::: in short (.). in Italian she got a pass (.). the same for history and geography however in the (.). other::: subjects foreign language that is English she has a °fail° (.). eh::: maths and science >science and maths< >chemistry=physics=natural sciences< fail (.). technology fail (.). art pass (.). music good (.). physical education good (.). religion pass >well these are the marks or rather< she started to improve a little bit well I::: let's say I gave her (.). a pass in humanities but she did the same as with the others <**she didn't study enough**> she did with me (.). that is **she must pay more attention (.). and she must study more (.).** so eh::: let's take a look at her behavior (.), she's behaves well but she chats °too much° eh=eh

2. **MOTHER:** [()]

3. **TEACHER:** [**she's °too° distracted**] <with respect to interpersonal relationships she often collaborates (.). even though she's not very communicative> I mean she participates (.). although let's say she doesn't=doesn't= doesn't express herself (.). she chats but not (.). <but she's not a girl who talks about herself:> no::: she's a bit introverted (.). she takes an active part in school life (.). sometimes not very constructive (.). eh::: to organize the work **she needs >a lot of help<** (.). she:::(.). I often see she's °very distracted° (.). the time is now (.). **she must apply herself (.).** the learning process is not regular in all the subjects of course (.). >**because she has some fails<** and the learning objectives (.). have been only partially achieved yes::: because only partially (.). she achieved (.). the objectives and got a pass she attended the additional workshops (.). for maths (.). IT and pottery with good results >you got good marks in the workshops<! instead:::(.). who knows!(.). **that's the::: situation of:::** >is yes=yes of course!< (.). now she must apply (.). please sign here(.). (.). yes:::now I've got to leave:::

4. **MOTHER:** yes!

5. **TEACHER:** so that:::

Italian original:

1. **DOCENTE:** va bene va ben >con la signora abbiamo già parlato< quindi già sa la situazione (.). eh::: (.). diamo nel dettaglio i voti::: (.). diciamo::: sintetici (.). in italiano ha avuto sufficiente (.). storia e geografia lo stesso mentre invece nelle (.). altre::: discipline lingua straniera cioè inglese non °sufficiente° (.). eh::: matematica e scienze >scienze e matematica< >scienze chimiche=fisiche=naturali< non sufficiente (.). educazione tecnica non sufficiente (.). educazione artistica sufficiente (.). educazione musicale buono (.). educazione fisica buono (.). religione sufficiente >va beh questi sono i risultati anzi< lei ha cominciato pure un poco a migliorare cioè io::: diciamo gli ho messo (.). la sufficienza nelle materie letterarie ma lei come ha fatto con gli altri <che **non ha studiato abbastanza**> lo ha fatto con me (.). **lei cioè deve stare più attenta (.). e deve stare deve studiare di più (.).** quindi eh::: vediamo il comportamento (.). è corretto però chiacchiera °molto° eh=eh

2. **MADRE:** [()]

3. **DOCENTE:**[**si distrae molto °si distrae molto°**] <nei rapporti interpersonali spesso collabora (.). anche se riservata> cioè partecipa (.). anche se diciamo non=non=non si esprime diciamo così (.). chiacchiera però non (.). <però non è una ragazza che dice le sue cose:> non::: è un po' chiusa (.). partecipa alla vita scolastica in modo attivo (.). a volte poco costruttivo (.). eh::: nell'organizzazione del lavoro **ha bisogno molto >molto bisogno di essere aiutata<** (.). lei:::(.). la vedo spesso °molto distratta° (.). adesso **è il momento (.). che si deve impegnare (.).** il processo di apprendimento non è regolare in tutte le aree logicamente (.). >**perché ha delle insufficienze<** e gli obiettivi didattici (.). sono stati raggiunti in modo parziale si::: giacché solo in parte (.). ha raggiunto (.). gli obiettivi sufficiente di sufficienza ha frequentato i laboratori di (.). recupero di matematica (.). di informatica e ceramica con buoni risultati >ai laboratori hai avuto buoni risultati-! invece:::(.). chi lo sa!(.). **questa è la::: situazione** del::: >è sì=sì certo!< (.). adesso lei si deve impegnare (.). la faccio firmare (.). (.). si:::io ora vi lascio:::

4. **MADRE:** sì!

5. **DOCENTE:**cosi:::

What is Actually at Stake in School-Family Meetings?

At wider level of analysis, the delivery of the report cards represents a real “ritual,” as it has all the main features of this type of social interaction. The school-family meeting takes place, as we have seen, in an institutional place (the school) and at a specific time (for example every 4 months), and the participants are individuals having specific roles (the teacher, the parents, the pupil/child), each assigning, though within the same framework, a particular symbolic meaning to the event. In such encounters the actors stage all the complexity of interpersonal dynamics in an institutional context. These are also meetings of different voices that tell different points of view, modulated by specific sets of beliefs, stemming from the experiences lived by the actors. In many cases the child’s success or failure ends up representing the “stakes” in a confrontation between the family’s and the school’s differing educational views. Taking a particular perspective, inspired by economic dimensions, it is possible to depict an intriguing economically oriented picture of school-family meetings as a real space of negotiation between parents and teachers. At this point the main research question could be: What is actually at stake in school-family meetings? First, the stake is the different representation of “education” and “school” held by parents and teachers. This difference can lead to two types of opposition. One is between school culture and family culture, even if not necessarily in the form of conflict (multi-dimensional *versus* mono-dimensional vision of the educational process). The second one is within the families’ educational

orientation (instrumental *versus* holistic-orienting vision of school).

With respect to the first opposition, the clash between school and family cultures becomes evident when the parents refer to a multi-dimensional educational vision in accordance with the idea that to be well-balanced, a person must do several experiences (see the Excerpt 1: Meeting #1, turn #18). This wide concept of education differs from the mono-dimensional educational vision presented in several teachers’ talks (as in the Excerpt 4: Meeting #1, turn #39) and circumscribed almost exclusively to the school engagements.

The second type of opposition is between *instrumental versus holistic-orienting vision of school* held by parents.

THE FUNCTIONAL DIMENSION OF THE SCHOOL

One of the key points around which parents organize their representations of school is what could be called the functional dimension, relating to the different purposes that families think the educational experience should have. In this dimension, it is possible to identify a first basic type of argumentation among those (and these are primarily families with a lower socio-economic status) who consider school a relevant factor for social mobility (see Excerpt 6, below).

Participants: Father, Mother, Daughter, Researcher

The participants are the researcher, the 12 years old female student attending the II year of middle school, the father, 41 years old hydraulic, and the mother, 37 years old housewife.

Excerpt 6: Interview #16

English translation:

54. FATHER: well:: (.) but:: (.) I think:: (.) ((laughs)) school is definitely everything (.) nowadays: (.) to be educated in something (.) I think:: (.) it’s must (.) so:: better one (.) has more quality:: (.) on (.) a field (.) the more it goes:: (.) and the future (.) really:: (.) it’s absolutely positive really [...]

57. MOTHER: in fact without school (.) without anything (.) ((laughs)) we can’t do:: anything ((laughs))

Italian original:

54. PADRE: va bè:: (.) ma:: (.) io penso che:: (.) ((ride)) la scuola è tutto in effetti (.) oggi: (.) essere istruiti in qualche cosa (.) secondo me:: (.) è di obbligo (.) quindi::anzi uno (.) più ha qualità:: (.) su (.) un settore (.) più va avanti:: (.) e il futuro (.) in effetti:: (.) è del tutto positivo in effetti [...]

57. MADRE: in effetti senza scuola (.) senza niente (.) ((ride)) non possiamo fa:: niente proprio ((ride))

These parents adopt an instrumental vision of school; they believe that obtaining a degree will make it easier to find a suitable job. They also believe that education differentiates people and helps to position a person socially. The voice of those parents who see school as essential to supporting their children's growth is completely different. They seem to refer to a holistic-orienting representation of school (*see* Excerpt 7, below), where educating means accompanying pupils through a

comprehensive and progressive discovery of their Self and adapting to the sociocultural context, by means of an empathetic element that is distinctive of the teacher-student relationship.

Participants: Father, Mother, Daughter, Researcher

The participants are the researcher, the 11 years old female student attending the I year of middle school, the father, 52 years old doctor, and the mother, 49 years old housewife.

Excerpt 7: Interview #2

English translation:

43. MOTHER: surely it's different from the school we went to (.) before they were (.) so strict (.) that we were afraid of teachers (.) of the head teacher (.) when we went to school (.) if we studied it was because (1.5) there was this (.) **now they're more::: open (.) available (.) towards the children (.) to understand them and also their problems if there are any** (1.5) different from the school of the past (.) I can't tell you if the old school (1.5) was better we should see it in time to see the results (.) now they seem to want to do MANY things (1.5) too many things forgetting (1.5) one's point of view ((smiles))


Italian original:

43. MADRE: sicuramente è diversa dalle scuole che abbiamo frequentato noi (.) prima c'era (.) una rigidità (.) tale per cui c'era il timore del professore (.) del preside (.) quando si andava a scuola (.) se si studiava era perché (1.5) c'era questo (.) **adesso c'è una maggiore::: apertura (.) disponibilità (.) nei riguardi dei ragazzi (.) a comprenderli anche verso i loro problemi se ci sono** (1.5). diversa dalla scuola precedente (.) non le so dire se era migliore (1.5) quella precedente dovremmo vedere nel tempo ai fini dei risultati (.) adesso sembra che si vogliono fare tante TANTE cose (1.5) troppe cose perdendo (1.5) il punto di vista ((sorride))

This holistic-orienting model of school may be easily related to the notion of the "parental function" as "taking charge" of one's child as a whole and following every aspect of his/her growth. This perception of school is similar in many ways to a family group, and its functions are comparable with the educational functions of a family.


Those opposite views of the school's function are part of the same perception shared by the common sense. According to this, the school is a relevant factor in promoting the development of each individual even when moving from a low socio-economic and sociocultural level.

But the stake in school-family meetings is also the adults' perception of the child. In this case it is possible to talk of an attributional bias (Ross, 1977; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross & Nisbett, 1991) (*see* Excerpt 8) and an opposition between the adult's culture and the youth's culture (as in Excerpt 9). During the report card delivery event, the adult's culture keeps its distance from the youth's culture,

by attributing school results to the child's dispositional aspects rather than contextual ones. 

Participants: Teacher, Father, (boy) Pupil

In Excerpt 8 (turn #7), the adult shows a clear attributional bias. In fact, parents and teachers seem to overestimate the "internal" origin of school results (referring to personal characteristics and his effort in his studying), underestimating situational factors (like for example the school system's organization, the curricula, the teaching methodology adopted, the family's supporting role). Even in case of opposition between family and school, adults converge anyway, and form a strategic *peace treaty* by stressing the dispositional and internal dimensions of the pupil.

In Excerpt 9 (turns #48 and #49) and Excerpt 10 (turns #5 and #6), it is possible to see such convergence between teachers and parents. 

Participants: Teacher, Father, (boy) Pupil

Participants: Teacher, Pupil (female), Father

The meetings between families and school are an adjustment of the social positions at stake. In the

Excerpt 8: Meeting #1**English translation:**

5. FATHER: (*(reading the report)*) so (.) Italian pass (.) History and Civic Education pass (.) Geography pass (.) Foreign Language pass (.) Sciences and Mathematics pass (.) Chemistry, Physics and Natural Science pass (.) Design and Technology fail (.) so (.) >this is a really serious<thing::: (.) >Art pass< (.) Music pass (.) Physical education good (.) this I didn't::: doubt (.) English pass (.) Religion pass, even Religion just a [pass]

6. SON: [eh]!

7. TEACHER: >let's say it all defines < his character::: (.) (1.0) and these (these) (.) technical things for example fail (2.0) we must try and::: improve them because I also think it's due (.) to a::: behavioral thing I think

Italian original:

5. PADRE: (*(legge la scheda)*) allora (.) Italiano sufficiente (.) Storia e Educazione Civica sufficiente (.) Geografia sufficiente (.) Lingua Straniera sufficiente (.) Scienze e Matematica sufficiente (.) Scienze Chimiche Fisiche Naturali sufficiente (.) Educazione Tecnica non sufficiente (.) quindi (.) >qua ci sta proprio un dato< grave::: (.) >Educazione Artistica sufficiente< (.) Educazione Musicale sufficiente (.) Educazione Fisica buono (.) questo non::: avevo dubbi (.) Inglese sufficiente (.) Religione sufficiente, pure Religione suffici[ente]

6. FIGLIO:[eh]!

7. DOCENTE: >diciamo che denota un po' tutto< il carattere di::: (.) (1.0) e queste (queste) (.) cose tecniche per esempio non sufficiente (2.0) dobbiamo cercare di::: migliorarci perché credo che sia anche dovuto (.) a un fatto di::: comportamento penso

Excerpt 9: Meeting #1**English translation:**

47. FATHER: I also want to say that from the beginning of the course (.) to the end of the course some prejudices (.) basically developed (.) and when prejudices have developed teachers find it difficult to overcome them (.) these things these are things I'm telling you as a parent (as a parent) you know why? because I know (.) the guy I know that teachers (.) sometimes (.9) because my son if you tell him off (.) even if you don't touch him (.) he'll be mortified for some time he looks for affection:::

48. TEACHER: [he's sensitive]

49. FATHER: [he's sensitive] I've never seen him (.) that superficially the thing=didn't=effect=him when they criticized (.) him it's always been with with::: deeply struck

Italian original:

47. PADRE:voglio poi dire che dall'inizio del corso (.) alla fine del corso si sono (.) creati fondamentalmente dei preconcetti (.) e quando si creano dei preconcetti gli insegnanti hanno difficoltà a scioglierli (.) queste cose sono cose che io vi dico da genitore (da genitore) sapete perché? perché conosco (.) il pollo allora io so che gli insegnanti (.) alcune volte (.9) perché mio figlio se lo sgridate (.) potete anche non toccarlo (.) lui rimane mortificato per un periodo di tempo e lui va alla ricerca dell'affetto:::

48. DOCENTE: [è sensibile]

49. PADRE: [è sensibile] io non lo mai visto (.) che con superficialità gli è passata=la=cosa=addosso lui quando gli hanno mosso (.) una critica è sempre stato con con::: sensibilmente colpito

opening part of each meeting there can be a more or less explicit conflict between the two “educational cultures” or, conversely, an alliance. If the family accepts the school's evaluation (which is very frequent, obviously, in the case of positive evaluations), this does not produce dynamic conversations: a conflict, of any form, contributes to clarifying the sophisticated

processes of attribution of meaning operated by the participants. The constant articulation between individual points of view (sets of beliefs expressed by single individuals) and representations emerging during the conversational interactions is particularly interesting. The need to defend one's position encourages the participants to seek “shared” arguments.

Excerpt 10: Meeting #8**English translation:**

1. TEACHER: so then (.) ((reads the school report card)) in Italian (.) pass mark (.) in history and civics pass mark (.) in geography good (.) foreign language good (.) science maths pass mark (.) chemistry physics pass mark (.) technics pass mark (.) arts good (.) physical education good (.) music good (.) religion very good (.) >we talked about the girl at the beginning had a phase

2. FATHER: [she got some]

3. TEACHER:[now she's recovering instead] (.) we hope that (.) that's the evaluation global

4. FATHER: global

5. TEACHER: first the evaluation of behavior (.) she behaves correctly (.) collaborates with mates (.) even if she's a little bit **reserved**

6. FATHER: **yes=yes closed**

Italian original:

1. DOCENTE: allora quindi (.) ((legge la scheda di valutazione)) in italiano (.) sufficiente (.) in storia e educazione civica sufficiente (.) in geografia buona (.) la lingua straniera buono (.) scienze matematiche è sufficiente (.) scienze chimiche fisiche e naturali sufficiente (.) educazione tecnica sufficiente (.) educazione artistica buono (.) educazione fisica buono (.) educazione musicale buono (.) religione distinto (.) >abbiamo già detto che la ragazza all'inizio ha avuto una fase

2. PADRE: [ha avuto un po']

3. DOCENTE: [adesso invece si sta riprendendo] (.) noi questo ci auguriamo (.) questo è il giudizio globale

4. PADRE: globale

5. DOCENTE: prima il giudizio sul comportamento (.) un comportamento corretto (.) collabora con i compagni (.) anche se **lei è riservata**

6. PADRE: **si=si chiusa**

SCHOOL-FAMILY MEETINGS AS A NEGOTIATION SPACE

It's worth underlying that adults' culture (parents and teachers) opposes youths' culture fundamentally, with:

a) the denial of child's role as partner in the social interaction. In fact the meetings made the presence of the participating pupils insignificant. When "the family goes to school" to learn about its children's evaluation, the situation becomes, in almost all cases, an "adult affair." To the children, who should actually be at the center of what is happening, a minimum conversational space is given. During the meeting with families, the predominant need is the comparison between two educational cultures; and

b) the shirking of adults' responsibilities through the overvaluation of pupil's dispositional elements, and the undervaluation of the elements of the educational context, both within school and outside school (family).

It is quite evident that the stake in school-family meetings is the pupil's value. How much is it worth? In the case of the opposition between the multi-dimensional and the mono-dimensional vision of education, the child's value depends on his more

or less complying with the model proposed by the family or by the school.

But the object rising or decreasing in value is also the school itself. For some parents, the school rises in value if it trains the child for a job, and it decreases in value if it does not provide the child with technical competencies. Therefore, it is evidently an instrumental vision of the school. For some other parents, the school rises in value when it forms the human being. It instead decreases in value when it becomes instrumental, and provides superficial factual knowledge, without a general framework of meaning.

In the opposition between adults' and youths' cultures we noted that adults manipulate the dispositional element and de-value the context. They emphasize the attributional bias to defend their identity of adults interacting with children. Magnifying the attribution bias could be, from the psycho-social point of view, a sort of defense, probably to protect their self-representation and the image of the family's and school's good functioning as constructed by the parents and teachers. School evaluation ends up coinciding more with what child *is* rather than with what child *knows*.

The analysis of the school-family meetings shows that the individual psychological dimension is of

value in explaining school success and failure. The knowledge of folk-psychological aspects, that is the child's individual dimension, is manipulated, becoming a commodity, a stake. This causes a devaluation of contextual aspects, such as the school organization, the curricula, the teaching methodology, the family's supporting role, the students' socio-economic level and standard of living, the presence of risk factors within the context, or, in Lewin's (1951) words, the "force field" operating when a given behavior takes place. The dimensions taken into account outlined an intriguing economically oriented picture of "school-family" meetings as a real negotiation space, underlining that what really happens on the border of these two educational micro-systems, even if only on a relatively small balcony, is much more complicated than it seems.

Of the many encounters between parents and teachers that take place in a short space of time, the school report event, as we have seen, constitutes a true boundary zone (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003) between the territory of the school and that of the family. In this contact situation, that could, in some ways be defined "cultural" (Iannaccone & Marsico, 2007), a number of fundamental elements of the symbolic-representative dimension generated by the encounter between parents and teachers emerged. Along this boundary, a series of psychosocial processes take place that are the product of the encounter and discursive exchange between parents and teachers. These processes would seem to be unpredictable a priori as they are connected to the attribution of sense of the players involved in the encounter. They appear to be interwoven with contextual factors (the type of school, the condition of success/failure, the disciplinary areas on which "critical" evaluations insist, etc.). In our research, as in other works (Valsiner, 2007b), the boundaries, by acting as "membranes," modulate and determine the relationship between the parts of the system. They make certain elements dynamic, inhibiting others. From this standpoint, school-family meetings take on different configurations that led to the emergence of many of the psycho-social and contextual dimensions involved.

Behind the Balcony: What Happens in the School?

The next step in our attempt to look at inside and outside school from the special location chosen calls for a glance behind the balcony. Many things take place in the school with respect to the learning

of specific knowledge and skills, but we are more interested in how the work of schooling contributes to the definition of the Self. Adopting a binocular vision from the balcony on which we are, it is easy to observe that the Self is formed through a variety of experiences both inside and outside school. Suffice it to consider the interrelationships and the constant transitions among different social settings in which each person is engaged (for example, family, peers, school, etc.). At same time, it is thus not exaggeration to say that the history of educational experiences, as a part of life's wider trajectory, plays a crucial role in the construction of the Self (Bruner, 1996). Every educational institution is the expression of a given culture and will tend to transmit, reproduce, and cultivate knowledge, beliefs, norms of behavior, and even emotions on the basis of which students interpret the natural and social world. Even the idea of Self, with its limits and characteristics, is typical of a given culture. School therefore contributes to the formation of the student's Self in such a way as to fit with the cultural requirements: for example, the emphasis on the values of individuality rather than affiliation, the role of agency and individual effort rather than cooperation, etc. (Bruner, 1996). This is the starting point of the reflection that led to the idea of Educational Self considered as a specific dimension of the Self, a regulatory process emerging from the experiencing of the I-Other relationship (Bakhtin, 1979/1986) in the educational context (Iannaccone & Marsico, 2007).

Defining Educational Self: Two Sides of the Same Coin

The idea of Educational Self involves two related aspects: the construction of the Self during the school age in the adults' discourse and the emergence of the Self when an adult interacts within an educational context (*see* Fig. 40.1).

The construction of the Educational Self (*see* Fig. 40.1a) is basically a dialogical process, taking place during the school age and involving multiple voices expressing different points of view, modulated by specific sets of beliefs and actors' experiences (Markova, 2006). Young people interact with adults, experiencing a dialogical and contractual space where the adults' and peers' voices provide different "as-if" possibilities, contributing to define what a person could be in present and in future time. The student's Self, somehow unclear, comes into contact with adult "voices" and is asked to negotiate, reject, or accept the different possible definition provided

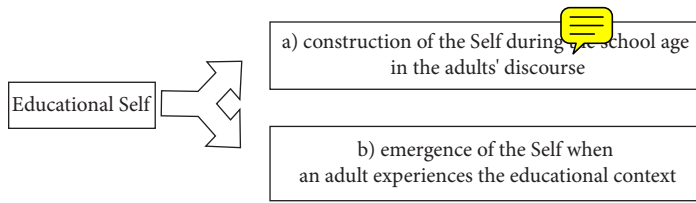


Figure 40.1 The two aspects of the Educational Self

(Simao & Valsiner, 2007). Through the processes of active internalization and symbolic mediation described above, the child will construct his own Educational Self and will activate it every time he subsequently acts in an educational context.

This is the second characteristic of the Educational Self, that is to become salient every time that the person is involved in an educational activity (*see* Fig. 40.1b), for example during significant turning points and life transitions such as higher education or professional training activities. The school experiences then emerge, providing values, models of behavior, norms, symbolic repertoires, emotional experiences, knowledge and practices that are internalized in the form of “voices” that will constitute a capital of symbolic resources on which the individual will draw (Zittoun, 2006).

This theoretical idea could help to understand how individuals learn to manage the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions with respect to the identity and the different Self positions when involved in educational activities (Hermans, 1996). Even an elderly person would experience an implication of the Educational Self when enrolling for a university of the third-age course (Leibing, 2005). In other words, the Educational Self can be conceived as a process of sense making on the move, referring to the past but, at the same time, shedding light on the future development of Self (Linell, 2009). The voices of the educational context define the individual’s identity: what he/she is, is not, should be and should not be, would be and would not be (Valsiner, 2007a).

A good example of the significant role played by the Educational Self is provided just by the school-family meeting. In this encounter, as we argued above, parents and teachers have to attribute meaning to their child’s success or failure at school, provide explanations, negotiate their viewpoint with the other, adjust their vision of the child with that provided by the school report card. This social sense-making process, that takes place in a conversational space, is based on the educational perspective (i.e., the representation of schooling

or of childhood) held by the actors (parents and teachers) and on the Educational Self as formed through one’s own educational history. Teachers, for instance, reinterpret the educational models, teaching styles, representations, and formal and informal norms, that they internalized in a continuous dialogue between the voices populating their educational and professional Self (Iannaccone et al., 2008; Ligorio & Tateo, 2008). In other words, past experiences as a student become a lens suitable for reading and interpreting all the present complexity of dynamics in the institutional context and also for modulating the discourse, identity positioning, and social behavior. Suffice it, for instance, to consider how parents feel during the school report card delivery event.

The first dimension of the Educational Self pertains to the adults’ discourse about the child’s Self (*see* Fig. 40.2a). In the excerpts presented below, it is possible to observe the role played by the definitions of the pupil’s Self provided by the parents and teachers, the discourses about the scholastic assessment and the explications of the academic success/failure stressed by adults and pupils and, finally, the process of “active internalization” of the adults’ feedback in the definition of the Educational Self.

Afterward, we’ll discuss the second aspect of the Educational Self, pertaining to the reactivation of this dimension of the Self when the adult enters the educational context. Some arguments evoked by participants during home-school encounters and interviews with parents realized after the report card’s delivery, explain how the Educational Self is reactivated and used to make sense of what happens to the pupil at school through the polyphony of the voices of the Self related to the educational experiences in the adults’ discourse.

Polyphonic Configurations: From Opposition to Juxtaposition of Voices

School-family meetings are highly meaningful events that involve perceptions, sense making and personal evaluations affecting the construction of Self (Berger, 1995; Dazzani & Faria, 2009;

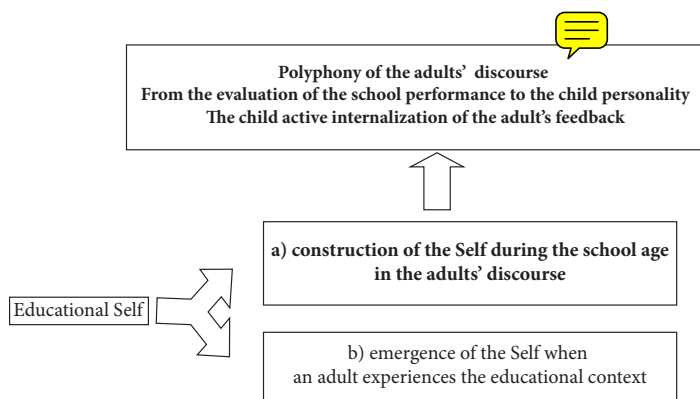


Figure 40.2 The construction of the child's Educational Self in the adult's discourse

Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). The meetings are the place where the teacher and parents' representations of the student are defined, made explicit, and modulated at a micro-genetic level (Marsico, Komatsu, & Iannaccone, in press). During the meetings, the student's Self—somewhat unclear and ill-defined—must come into contact with adults' voices negotiating, rejecting, or accepting the different positions. This results in a very dynamic situation stressing the fluid and dialogical nature of the Self-definition's process.

The following excerpts of the family-school meetings concern three types of dialogical events in which the voices of parents and teachers produce different polyphonic configurations: *Opposition of voices* (Excerpt 11), *Different intonation of the voice* (Excerpt 13), and *Juxtaposition of voices* (Excerpt 14). Moreover, Excerpt 12 (*The voice of youth*) is, on the other hand, an example of an interview with a family that shows some relevant dimensions affecting the definition of the Self.

OPPOSITION OF VOICES

In Excerpt 11 we can observe an “opposition of voices” emerging during a meeting between teacher, student (a 13-year-old) and his father (a 46-year-old).

The school and the family voice different perceptions of the child. For the school, the boy is shallow and not very constructive. He should be kept an eye on because he is not yet independent and responsible. He is still immature and needs the control and guidance of adults (turn #11). For the family, the boy is fairly independent. He can accomplish his assignments and can evaluate both himself and the teachers. He is certainly mature and able to establish relationships based on trust rather than control (turns #24 and #42).

THE VOICE OF YOUTH

The Excerpt 12 refers to the same family as Excerpt 11. The discursive interaction between father and son during the interview focuses on the dimension of evaluation embedded in the process of identity definition.

The boy positively evaluates his less-than-excellent school results, showing that his self-esteem is not attached to the academic assessment (turn #10). The father's statement (turn #15) produces a conversational shift that determines a discursive overlap between the assessment of his son's academic performance and that of the person (“you're worth so much?”).

In this case, the Self is directly involved with the value that the boy attaches to himself. The process of identity definition is ongoing, this clearly makes it difficult for the boy to answer (turn #16: “I don't know how much I'm worth”). During the meeting, he must face the institutional voice of the school that defines his competence and his psychosocial characteristics through the artifact, the school report card. He must also face two other voices as equally meaningful on a psychological level (parent and teacher). They straightway express in the presence of the child the opposite perceptions of his Self (*mature* versus *immature*) as shown in Excerpt 11. In this polyphony, the boy must mediate between what he thinks about himself and what the significant others think about him. In this case, it is possible to talk about a polyphony of voices that define a dynamic and dialogical system of the Self under construction.

DIFFERENT INTONATION OF THE VOICE

Excerpt 13 shows the “different intonation of the voice” by the school and the family, attaching different connotations to some behaviors and psychological characteristics of the child's Self. The meeting

Excerpt 11: Meeting #1**English translation:**

11. **TEACHER:** in class=little constructive this is::: probably due to his (1.5) following lessons not always (.) correctly (1.5) in organizing his work he is still a little uncertain

[...]

24. **FATHER:** then I'll (1.5) repeat it to you since we basically (.) established (.) both with my daughter and with him (.) a trust-based relationship (1.5) in which I basically say I trust you (.) you've got to do your things (.) I don't even want to have to check on that every day (.) because I obviously check on it periodically

[...]

42. **FATHER:**... what I notice (what I notice) and obviously I'm telling you this in a very (.) relaxed way is that they can judge themselves (.) they can judge their teachers (.) they have their own evaluation scale [inside]

43. **TEACHER:** [but] they could have a higher self-esteem than [that which]

44. **FATHER:**[nooo] this is a mistake that I don't make because I tell him be critical about yourself (.) because you can be critical about yourself everyday

Italian original:

11. in classe=questo poco costruttivo è::: dovuto probabilmente a (1.5) un'attenzione in classe non sempre (.) corretta (1.5) nell'organizzazione del lavoro manifesta ancora qualche incertezza

[...]

24. **PADRE:** io allora (1.5) vi ripeto siccome praticamente noi abbiamo (.) impostato (.) sia con mia figlia che con lui (.) un rapporto di fiducia (1.5) in cui praticamente dico io mi fido di te (.) tu devi fare le cose(.) io non voglio neanche venire a verificarle tutti i giorni (.) perché io chiaramente le verifico a step

[...]

42. **PADRE:** ... io quello che noto (quello che noto) e chiaramente dico a voi in modo (.) molto rilassato che loro da soli si sanno giudicare (.) sanno giudicare i professori (.) hanno una scala di valutazione dei professori loro la hanno [internamente]

43. **DOCENTE:** [però] potrebbero avere un'autostima superiore rispetto a [quella che]

44. **PADRE:**[nooo] questo no su questo è un errore che io non commetto perché io gli dico tu criticati (.) tanto perché tutti i giorni ti potrai criticare

Excerpt 12: Interview #1**English translation:**

9. **RESEARCHER:** and what do you think of these school results?

10. **SON:** they're ok ((smiles))

11. **RESEARCHER:** was it what [you expected]?

12. **SON:** [yes=yes]

13. **FATHER:** >that is you in your opinion you should have a pass in all subjects?<

14. **SON:** °yes° ((smiling))

15. **FATHER:** >you're worth so much?<

16. **SON:** °I don't know how much I'm worth° ((looks down))

17. **FATHER:** >you don't know how much you're worth?< ((smiling))

18. **SON:** °no°

Italian original:

9. **RICERCATRICE:** tu invece che pensi di questi risultati scolastici?

10. **FIGLIO:** vanno bene ((sorride))

11. **RICERCATRICE:** era quello che [ti aspettavi]?

12. **FIGLIO:** [sì=sì]

13. **PADRE:** >cioè tu secondo te devi avere tutti sufficiente?<

14. **FIGLIO:** °sì° ((sorridendo))

15. **PADRE:** >tanto vali?<

16. **FIGLIO:** °non lo so quanto valgo° ((abbassa gli occhi))

17. **PADRE:** >non lo sai quanto vali?< ((sorridendo))

18. **FIGLIO:** °no°

Excerpt 13: Meeting #11

English translation:

1. **TEACHER:** before re:ading (.) the evaluations reported for each:: discipline (.) I would say that the pupil is: a little taciturn (.) *((laughs))* **I would say (.) eh! (.) is a little taciturn (.) eh:: (.) he loves his own company:: (.) he's often stimulated to [be]**

2. **MOTHER:** [become part of]

3. **TEACHER:** become part of (.) >no become part of< (.) because he can do it (.) **I mean being close to someone (.)** but if he must sit alone he do:esn't have difficulties (.) that's maybe

4. **MOTHER:** just to not be near

5. **TEACHER:** eh=eh he would prefer to be alone (.) rather than:: (.) but he's not aso[cial]

6. **MOTHER:** [no=no]

7. **TEACHER:** for heaven's sake (.) on the contrary he's a boy::

8. **MOTHER:** but: he's a little:: (.) a:n (.) not in bad sense (.) but:: **he's got his own:: [ideas]**

9. **TEACHER:** [ideas] (.) so: (.) as they say:: (.) better alone than in bad company (.) but (.) **I think:: (.) he should start to get used to spend time with ((laughs)) the types of (.) is not like ((laughs)) (.) in the sense (.) taciturn=silent (.) also to manage himself for**

10. **MOTHER:** no (.) I don't believe it's (.) being taciturn or not (.) because actually he gets on well with G. *((mentions a school mate))* who (.) when he buttonholes he never stops (.) they know each other very well

11. **TEACHER:** ()

12. **MOTHER:** **but:: he doesn't like:: (.) nosy people**

13. **TEACHER:** eh! (.) but we have some in class (.) eh:: and he has to learn to cope with them

Italian original:

1. **DOCENTE:** prima di le:ggere (.) le valutazioni riportate per le varie:: discipline (.) volevo dire che l'allievo è: un po' taciturno (.) *((ride))* **volevo dire (.) eh! (.) è un po' taciturno (.) eh:: (.) ama pure stare da solo:: (.) molte volte viene sollecitato a [essere]**

2. **MADRE:** [a inserirsi]

3. **DOCENTE:** a inserirsi (.) >no a inserirsi!< (.) perché si inserisce bene (.) cioè **a stare vicino a qualcuno (.)** però se deve stare seduto da solo no:n trova alcuna difficoltà (.) cosa che magari

4. **MADRE:** pur di non stare vicino a

5. **DOCENTE:** eh=eh preferirebbe stare da solo (.) più che:: (.) ma non è che è aso[ciale]

6. **MADRE:** [no=no]

7. **DOCENTE:** per carità (.) anzi è un ragazzino::

8. **MADRE:** però: e un po': (.) u:n (.) non in senso cattivo (.) però:: **diciamo che ha le sue:: [idee]**

9. **DOCENTE:** [idee] (.) per cui: (.) si dice:: (.) meglio solo che mal accompagnato (.) però (.) secondo me:: (.) **dovrebbe cominciare ad abituarti a stare anche un po' con ((ride)) i vari tipi (.) chi non è come lui ((ride)) (.) magari nel senso (.) taciturno=silenzioso (.) anche per gestirsi per**

10. **MADRE:** no (.) io non credo sia (.) di essere taciturno o meno (.) perché in realtà lui si trova bene con G. *((cita un compagno))* che (.) °quando attacca a parlare non la finisce più° (.) si conoscono tantissimo

11. **DOCENTE:** ()

12. **MADRE:** **però: gli danno fastidio: (.) gli invadenti**

13. **DOCENTE:** eh! (.) purtroppo ci sono in classe (.) eh:: ed è anche giusto che lui li sappia affrontare

involved the teacher, the 11-year-old student, and his 42-year-old mother, a housewife.

According to the teacher, the boy is introverted and tends to avoid social relationships (turns #1 and #3). This closure could be a potential sign of an asocial personality. He should instead open up to social interaction in order to learn how to tune his behavior and how to manage social relationships (turn #9). In accordance with the school's voice, the boy has difficulties in social integration. From the family's point of view, the boy chooses to spend time alone because of specific preferences (turn #8: "he's got his own

[ideas]"). In the opinion of the family, the boy has clear ideas about the type of interactions and persons he looks for (turn #12). In short, the family reinterprets the boy's taciturn and loner aspects in positive terms, emphasizing his need for autonomy.

JUXTAPOSITION OF VOICES

Excerpt 14 presents a "juxtaposition of voices" between family and school during the meeting involving the teacher, 13-year-old student, his 50-year-old father, a doctor, and his 40-year-old mother, a teacher.

Excerpt 14: Meeting #13**English translation:**

11. **TEACHER:** although are only in the first 4-months term (.) let's say that the important thing is::: **that overall he seems a mature boy** (.) I must tell you the truth

[...]

23. **TEACHER:** for the deepness of thinking

24. **MOTHER:** yes

25. **TEACHER: yes but at other times, on the other hand**

26. **MOTHER: yes that's true**

27. **TEACHER: he seems a child to me**

28. **MOTHER: yes that's true=that's true**

[...]

36. **MOTHER: ok he's always like that! ok well he's only 10!**

37. **TEACHER:** let's say >he's in this phase of growth < so he shows alternate phases

38. **MOTHER:** [()]

39. **TEACHER:** [yes=yes yes=yes]

40. **FATHER:** he needs to leave childhood behind

41. **TEACHER: eh! eh! he made a poster in classroom on adolescence and I asked him I said why have you drawn a shrimp?**

[...]

50. **TEACHER:** that is what he said later on (.) actually

51. **MOTHER:** ()

52. **TEACHER: let's say when he wants and::: he's one hundred percent mature and at other times**

53. **FATHER: he is like that at home too**

54. **MOTHER: at home he's like that**

Italian original:

11. **DOCENTE:** siamo anche al primo quadrimestre (.) diciamo che l'importante che::: **il più delle volte appare come un ragazzo maturo** (.) vi devo dire la verità

[...]

23. **DOCENTE:** per la profondità proprio di pensiero

24. **MADRE:** si

25. **DOCENTE: si poi in altri momenti invece**

26. **MADRE: si è vero**

27. **DOCENTE: mi sembra un bambino**

28. **MADRE: si è vero =è vero**

[...]

36. **MADRE: va beh è sempre così! va beh che c'ha dieci anni!**

37. **DOCENTE:** si diciamo >che è in questa fase di crescita< per cui mostra queste fasi alterne

38. **MADRE:** [()]

39. **DOCENTE:** [si=si si=si]

40. **PADRE:** si dovrebbe lasciare alle spalle un poco di infanzia

41. **DOCENTE: eh! eh! ha fatto un cartellone in classe sull'adolescenza e io gli ho chiesto dico ma perché rappresenta un gambero?**

[...]

50. **DOCENTE:** poi me l'ha raccontato così (.) effettivamente

51. **MADRE:** ()

52. **DOCENTE: diciamo quando vuole e::: è maturo al cento per cento altre volte poi**

53. **PADRE: lo fa anche a casa**

54. **MADRE: pure a casa è così**

The voices of the family and the school seem to converge toward a common perception of the child's Self (turns #11, #25, #26, #27, #28). For both teacher and parents the boy shows a sort of inconsistency, switching from mature behaviors to childish ones (turns #52, #53, #54). The voice of the child is evoked by the teacher through a semiotic mediation device. In fact, the teachers reports (turn #41) that during a classroom activity, the pupil, when asked to create a poster, decided to portray adolescence as a "shrimp," showing the presence of a self-reflexive process with respect to the fluctuations in the definition of his own identity. The boy

himself therefore seems to be aware of the instability typical of the pre-adolescent phase. This uncertainty echoes the mother's discourse (turn #36) accounting for the son's apparent immaturity by attributing him a "lower" age ("ok well he's only 10!"), when he is actually 13 years old.

POLIPHONY, SYMBOLIC RESOURCES AND TEMPORALITY

The main purpose, formally established, of the school-family meeting is to communicate to the parents the results of the child's scholastic development. What actually emerges is more complex

and interesting from a dialogical viewpoint. First, the communication of the academic results is situated within a ritualistic and structured context of activity in which many other elements are at stake. The excerpts presented show that during the school-family meetings, the child is provided with a set of symbolic resources in the form of the voices that the adults use to talk about his Self. The pupil then draws on these resources and on the different definitions of the Self given by the significant adults (parents and teachers). A space of negotiation is thus opened in which the pupil can decide to accept, reject, or remodulate the possible definitions of the Self. The outcomes cannot be predicted, but what matters here is the interactive and dialogical nature of this process. It is a fluid and problematic process for the child because these voices can be either consonant, dissonant, or opposite to one another. At the same time, they can partially agree with the child's self-perception or else they can totally disagree with it. This process takes place within the constraints of power relationships and the framework of the specific culturally situated activity. The power relationships limit the range of possible Selves that the child can construct because the polyphony of voices is however a "selection" emerging within given cultural parameters (Bruner, 1996). They define the different identity "possibilities," for instance what a "good" or "bad" pupil is, or what a growing child should or should not become. Besides, the school-family meetings and their voices are contextualized within a time perspective (see Fig. 40.3).

Thus, there is a time "before" the meeting, concerning the whole experience of the pupil in the educational context. This experience contributes to defining his Self and can be partially documented through the academic assessment. There is a "present" time of the meeting and, finally, there is a time "after," concerning the development of the Self in the future. This development can be only imagined within the range of some culturally defined identity options. The adults' voices then contribute to

defining what the child is, what he is not, what he should and should not be, what he could and could not be.

An Easy Shift

In the previous pages we have underlined how the process of definition of a child's identity is closely connected with his/her scholastic experience. In this perspective, academic success or failure acquires value in relation to a positive or negative definition of the Self (as seen in the Excerpt 2). Besides, school assessments are also frequently used not only to define the features of a "good" or "bad" student, but also to connote the child/pupil's identity.

Scholastic assessment ends up coinciding with what the child *is* rather than with what the child *knows* (as in Excerpt 8, turn #7: the teachers says, "let's say it all defines his character").

Excerpt 15, on the other hand, concerns an interview with a family made up of an 11-year-old pupil, her 52-year-old father, a doctor, and her 49-year-old mother, a housewife. The pupil's academic performance, according to her teachers, is very good.

The excerpt shows that for both the teachers and parents the school results tell what kind of person the child is. In this excerpt, the adults account for school success or failure by attributing academic performance to the child's dispositional and internal aspects (Excerpt #15 turn #21: the father says, "she's responsible"). Thus, results define the pupil but they are the outcome of her personal characteristics in return, like a sort of identity definition feedback loop. It is evident how scholastic assessment can take on meanings that are more closely related to the definition of identity and "self-value," showing how assessing performance can easily become assessing the person. This has a particularly meaningful connotation on a psycho-social level, especially considering the very delicate transitional phase pre-adolescents and adolescent students are going through, in which they face the fundamental task of constructing their Selves.

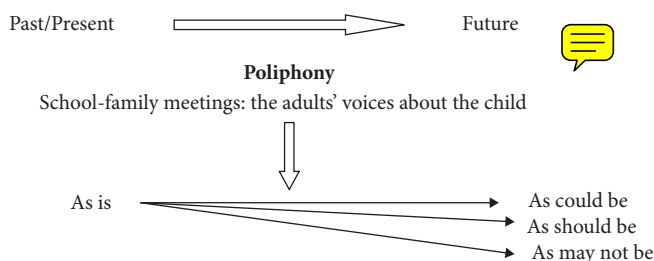


Figure 40.3 Polyphony and time perspective. Adapted from Valsiner (2007) with permission.

AQ3

Excerpt 15: Interview #2**English translation:**

18. RESEARCHER: why (.) do you think your daughter got these very good results? What do you put it down to?

19. FATHER: because she is certainly (1.5) in the humanities (.) we know she's more talented (.) she likes reading writing she writes quite well because indeed at home she's been encouraged to read

20. MOTHER: >apart from the fact< that she's a very conscientious girl (.) she has a conscience (.) she does everything what has to be done

21. FATHER: [she's responsible]

22. MOTHER: [she's very responsible] she isn't a superficial girl (.) that leaves things she's responsible and conscientious

Italian original:

18. RICERCATRICE: perché (.), secondo voi, vostra figlia ha ricevuto questi risultati che sono sicuramente ottimi? a cosa lo attribuite?

19. PADRE: perché sicuramente lei (1.5) nelle materie umanistiche (.) sappiamo è più portata (.) le piace leggere scrive abbastanza bene proprio perché a casa è stata abituata alla lettura

20. MADRE:>a parte il fatto< che è una bambina molto coscienziosa (.) lei ha una coscienza (.) fa tutto quello che deve essere fatto

21. PADRE: [è responsabile]

22. MADRE: [è molto responsabile] non è una bambina superficiale (.) che lascia le cose è responsabile e coscienziosa

In short, on a broader conceptual level, scholastic assessment seems to acquire symbolic meanings and to become: (1) a modulator of the identity-building process; (2) an element that can confirm or destabilize the emerging idea of Self; (3) a negotiational space with respect to the way pupil is perceived by both parents and teachers.

The Child's Active Internalization of the Adults' Voices

The legacy of "evaluations about the person" is the object of the active internalization process that is, the raw material for the definition of the Self. The following excerpt shows how the child reformulates and elaborates the judgements on the Self, emerging during the dialogical interaction with the adults, and uses them to talk about himself. Actually, it is not a passive echoing of adult voices, but a personal and active redefinition of the identity options provided by the adults' discourse. These options dialogically define what the child is but at the same time imply the exclusion of what he is not. In other words, the child appropriates of the "adult voices" that talk about the Self, performing that process that goes from the externalization of the semiotic forms to their internalization as tools for defining and regulating the Self.

The dialogical definition of the child's Self is shown in Excerpt 16, also taken from Interview #1, in which the researcher, the father (a 46-year-old)

and the son (a 13-year-old student) are discussing the child's school results.

During the first phase of the interaction (turns #19 to #26), the father and the son start an exchange in which the parent asks the son to answer for his level of diligence in his studies (turn #19: the father says, "but you believe that you study the subjects thoroughly in the right way all the subjects?"), repositing at turns #21 and #23 his personal viewpoint on the method of study. In a first phase of the dialogue, the son seems to assume an acquiescent position (turns #20, #24 and #28). When the researcher asks him straight out to express his own opinion on why his academic performance is not brilliant, the child appears to be uncertain and confused (turn #28: "don't know!"). The uncertainty seems to disappear at turn #30 when the child chooses to account for his performance by evoking his "superficial" attitude to his studies. Actually, in this turn it would appear that the child chooses to talk about himself with the same connotations as his father's discourse. Nevertheless, he mediates—this could be understood as a son's active internalization—between the adult's voice—that defines him as "superficial"—and the self-perception he is constructing of a person that, despite the recognition of this lack of diligence, does not judge himself in totally negative terms (turn #30 "even in things I like a pass is okay"). This represents a clear example

Excerpt 16: Interview #1**English translation:**

19. FATHER: >but you believe that you study the subjects thoroughly< (.) >in the right way all the subjects<?

20. SON: °no° ((*lowers his eyes*))

21. FATHER: >and what did your father always tell you< (.) >Italian language, history e geography you can't get pass mark<

22. SON: °not pass mark°

23. FATHER: no (.) I said pass mark >is scant because pass mark:::< means that you actually gave a quick look at the pages (.), am I wrong?

24. SON: °yes°

25. FATHER: >that's what I always say to you?<

26. SON: eh! ((*nod*))

27. RESEARCHER: why do you think you got these results?

28. SON: °don't know!°

29. RESEARCHER: according to dad it's clear, what about you?

30. SON: maybe because I am superficial (1.0) well I don't go into enough::: even in things I like a pass is okay ((*smiles and lower his eyes*))

Italian original:

19. PADRE: >ma credi che tu approfondisci giusto nelle materie< (.), >in un modo corretto a tutte le materie<?

20. FIGLIO: °no° ((*abbassa gli occhi*))

21. PADRE: >e che ti ha detto sempre tuo padre< (.), >italiano, storia e geografia non si può prendere sufficiente<

22. FIGLIO: °non sufficiente°

23. PADRE: no (.) ho detto che sufficiente >è poco perché sufficiente:::< vuol dire che praticamente hai fatto una girata dei fogli (.), o mi sbaglio?

24. FIGLIO: °sì°

25. PADRE: >te lo dico sempre?<

26. FIGLIO: eh! ((*fa cenno con la testa*))


27. RICERCATRICE: perché secondo te, hai avuto questi risultati?

28. FIGLIO: °bo!°

29. RICERCATRICE: secondo papà è abbastanza chiaro, secondo te?

30. FIGLIO: perché sono superficiale forse (1.0), cioè non approfondisco::: pure quello che mi piace lo stesso sulla sufficienza va bene ((*sorride e abbassa lo sguardo*))

of the modulation and negotiation between the adult's voice and the child's vision of his own Self.

In Excerpt 17 the researcher is interviewing a family composed of two sons, 12 and 13 years old, attending two different classes at the same school, the father, a 45-year-old nurse, and the mother, a 41-year-old housewife. Again in this case, the participants are discussing the school results. 

In this excerpt, the parents introduce a wider time perspective in the evaluation of their sons' scholastic results (turns #39 to #41). The parents suggest that the results at school are related to life expectations and the commitment required to study is the same quality that should serve to face the forthcoming challenges of life. The topic at stake is commitment, which goes beyond the boundaries of the school results (turn #41). It is something "acquired" through education but necessary for life. In this case, the two sons had good marks, so their capability is not questioned and commitment is "already" part of the definition of Self provided by the adults (teacher and parents).

Son #1, when asked by the researcher, seems to accept this viewpoint (turn #43), but he immediately proposes a complementary explanation (I did what I had to do) in terms of compliance to the school's requirements. Son #2 seems to agree with his brother's explanation (turn #45). In this case, the children's definition of Self seems to agree with the adults', and it doesn't require a significant negotiation between different or opposite viewpoints as in Excerpt 16. The children seem to comply with the expectations of both the family—commitment to grow up—and the school—a "good" pupil fulfills his assignments. Nevertheless, the two pupils in Excerpt 17 do not disagree with the adult position but play a different type of active appropriation and negotiation between voices. In this case they "attune" their definition of the Self by appropriating and internalizing the categories of the adults' discourse. Then they use these categories as self-regulatory instances in order to orient their semiotic behavior, their self-presentation, and sense-making of school experiences.

Excerpt 17: Interview #3

English translation:

39. MOTHER: because there's a question underlying all this there's a question of (.) preparing the future (.) the society (.) as we know (.) is (.) so it's important (.) the=crafts=doesn't=exist=anymore (.) the=manual=labor (.) so with three sons we try to make them understand the importance

40. FATHER: we talk with them above all about these problems

41. MOTHER: commit yourself for your future (.) now we've done our job ((gesticulates)) (.) do your best for your future (1.5) and that's the only way by nowadays (.) and so it's good to commit oneself (1.5) to have a better future

42. RESEARCHER: why do you think you got these marks? (names SON #1) why?

43. SON #1: ((smiles)) during the school year (.) I applied myself (.) I did what I had to do

44. RESEARCHER: so perseverance rewarded you (.) and what about you (names SON #2)?

45. SON #2: eh:: (2.0) let's say the same thing

46. RESEARCHER: you applied yourself?

47. SON #2: yes

Italian original:

39. MADRE: perché poi comunque dietro c'è tutto un discorso (.), per la preparazione del futuro (.) La società, sappiamo, è ormai (.), quindi è importante (.) non=esiste=più=il=mestiere, il lavoro=manuale=artigianale. Quindi con tre maschi cerchiamo di fargli capire l'importanza

40. PADRE: ci si parla con loro soprattutto di questi problemi

41. MADRE: impegnatevi per il vostro futuro (.), ormai il nostro lo abbiamo fatto ((gesticola)), per il vostro futuro impegnatevi (1.5) ed è l'unico modo al momento (.) e quindi è bene impegnarsi (1.5) per avere il futuro più facile

42. RICERCATRICE: secondo voi perché avuto questi voti? Corrado perché?

43. FIGLIO 1: ((sorride)) nel corso dell'anno scolastico (.) mi sono impegnato, ho fatto quello che dovevo fare

44. RICERCATRICE: quindi la costanza ti ha premiato (.) E tu Adriano, perché?

45. FIGLIO 2: eh:: (2.0) diciamo per la stessa cosa

46. RICERCATRICE: ti sei impegnato?

47. FIGLIO 2: sì

In more general terms, Excerpts 16 and 17 are examples of the symbolic process of active appropriation that leads to the construction of the Self. What happens is that the children are provided with images of the Self, norms, values, and explanations of their behavior. They elaborate the signs adults use to talk about them but at the same time they elaborate these signs to produce their own view, which is partially coinciding and partially not.

The Other Side of the Coin: The Educational Self in the Adult's Life

The second characteristic of the Educational Self (*see* Fig. 40.4b) is the fact that it emerges and becomes salient every time the person participates in an activity within an educational context⁵. The legacy of symbolic resources (systems of activity, emotional experience, etc.) attached to the school experience, is used by the adults to regulate and

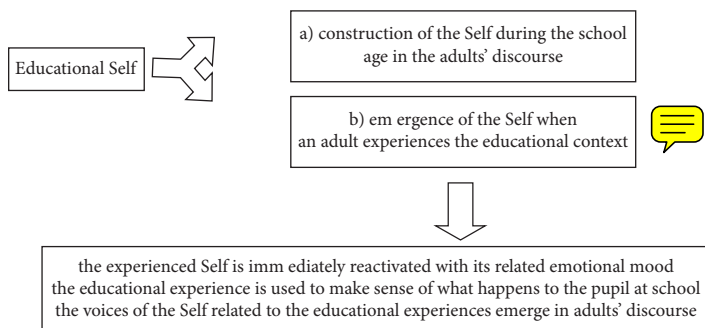


Figure 40.4 The emergence of the adult's Educational Self

modulate the interaction and to make sense of what happens in this type of situation. This process emerges in our data under three different forms:

- 1) the experienced Self is immediately reactivated with its related emotional mood;
- 2) the traces of the educational experience are used to make sense of what happens to the pupil at school; and
- 3) points 1 and 2 emerge in the adult's discourse through the voices of the Self related to the educational experiences.

The first form is presented in Excerpt 18, where we can see how the experienced Self of the parents is immediately reactivated by the school-family meeting. The researcher interviews a family just after the school-family meeting. The family is composed by the father, a 41-year-old craftsman, the mother, a 40-year-old waitress, and the son, age 12 years. First, the researcher asks the parents to evaluate their son's school. The mother starts to talk about the headmaster, who was incidentally her teacher when she left the school before finishing (turns #24,

#26). Then the researcher asks for the father's opinion (turns #27, #30).

Both the mother and the father left school after obtaining their middle school diploma and went out to work. In turn #24, the mother immediately refers to the important turning point in her life ("instead I decided to get a job"). She juxtaposes a present and a past situation linked by the person of her teacher. She was a good student, she loved the school, but she decided to leave despite her teacher's advise. When she comes back to school as a mother, she meets again the same person, who has become in the meantime the headmaster, and she reports his discourse in the third person ("when he saw me he told me 'don't do to your son what you did to yourself'") to argue in favor of her present belief as a parent of a school-age son ("going to school is better than going to work"). The narrative of the mother's biography (turns #24, #29 and #31) seems to be attached to an immediate activation of an emotional and "nostalgic" mood ("If I could go back yes"). On the other hand, when the father is asked to evaluate the school (turn #30) he immediately presents not only the same "nostalgic" mood ("we

Excerpt 18: Interview #8

English translation:

24. MOTHER: yes he's a smart person (.) when he saw me I took my son to middle school for the first time (.) because I didn't finish the school (.) I just finished the middle school and didn't want to go on (.) even if I got good notes (.) when he saw me he told me don't do to your son what you did to yourself (.) he came home to tell me I must go on (.) instead I decided to get a job

25. RESEARCHER: in general (.) what is your idea about the school?

26. MOTHER: it's a good thing (.) beyond literacy (.) going to school is better than going to work

27. RESEARCHER: does daddy think so too?

28. FATHER: yes=yes

29. MOTHER: If we could go back yes

30. FATHER: that's what I said earlier to the teacher (.) I sat down at the little school desk (.) I would go back to school again

31. MOTHER: it's very nice (.) I loved going to school (.) a lot

Italian original:

24. MADRE: sì una persona in gamba (.) quando mi vide la prima volta che portai mio figlio in prima media (.) perché io non ho continuato (.) ho fatto la terza media e non ho voluto continuare (.) anche se andavo moto bene a scuola (.) come mi vide disse non far fare a tuo figlio quello che hai fatto tu venne fino a casa che io dovevo continuare mi misi in testa che dovevo andare a lavorare

25. RICERCATRICE: e in generale (.) rispetto alla scuola che idea avete?

26. MADRE: è una cosa buona (.) a parte una cultura generale (.) è meglio andare a scuola che lavorare!

27. RICERCATRICE: anche il papà pensa così?

28. PADRE: sì=sì

29. MADRE: se tornavamo indietro sì

30. PADRE: l'ho detto prima alla professoressa (.) mi sono seduto nel banchetto (.) io ritornerei un'altra volta a scuola

31. MADRE: è molto bello (.) a me piaceva andare a scuola (.) tanto

would go back to school again”), but he accounts for the activation of a specific “educational” behavior (I sat down at the little school desk). Excerpt 18 shows how the adults, while getting in contact with the educational context, immediately activate a repertoire of voices, norms, emotions, and behaviors that are part of the Educational Self, and use it to make sense of their life trajectory as individuals, students, and parents. The parents “know” how to behave and self-regulate at school, even if they are actually there as parents, because they immediately grasp their previous experience. At the same time, the internalized teacher’s voice, once addressed to them as *students*, is now used to account for their choices as *parents*.

The second characteristic of the adult’s Educational Self is that the educational experience is used to make sense of what’s happening at school. The parents provide some evaluations of the school with respect to their past experience and account for a change, which is not easy to elaborate.

As shown in Excerpt 7 (turn #43) the mother immediately compares the present situation of

her daughter’s school with her own experience as a student. It should be noted that she evokes the emotional condition (“we were afraid”) and the relationship with the adults (“the teacher, the principal”) rather than other dimensions such as learning. In the same way, the difference between “her” school and that of her daughter is described in terms of “open-mindedness” and attention to the student’s “problems” rather than subjects or methods.

Excerpt 19, on the other hand, is taken from Interview #3 involving two sons, (12 and 13 years old), the father, and the mother.

In this excerpt, the focus of both parents (turns #40, #41 and #48) is on the change that has taken place in terms of methods, subjects, and programs. As in Excerpt 7, the parents immediately refer to their own school experience to make comparisons. These are two examples of the different way adults refer to their school experience to make sense of their children’s situation. Although, the parents’ evaluations focus on different dimensions, the emotional experience and the relationship *versus* the learning and the method, both the excerpts show a

Excerpt 19: Interview #3

English translation:

39. RESEARCHER: and in general (.) what do you parents think about the school?

40. MOTHER: it has made great strides from time to time (1.5) maybe too many [many:::]

41. FATHER: [many] (.) we remember our school once upon a time (.) a school with (.) a teacher (.) schematic (.) mechanical (.) school isn’t like that any more (.) the programs (.) the subjects (.) are different (.) they do (1.5) not have to study like (.) we used to but like::: (3.0) how can I say

42. RESEARCHER: maybe not the [content]

43. FATHER: [the content]

44. RESEARCHER: [a method?]

45. FATHER: [yes a method]

46. RESEARCHER: school in general has changed like:::

47. FATHER: hasty

48. MOTHER: we don’t have the time to (.) get to grips with one phase and (.) they’ve suddenly moved on to the next one (.) I don’t know (.) maybe that’s good (.) I can’t really say

Italian original:

39. RICERCATRICE: e in generale (.) voi genitori che pensate della scuola?

40. MADRE: si sono fatti passi da gigante da un momento all’altro (1.5) troppi forse [troppi:::]

41. PADRE: [troppi] (.) noi ci ricordiamo la scuola di un tempo (.) di una scuola con (.) un insegnante (.) schematica (.) meccanica (.) invece la scuola di adesso no (.) sui programmi (.) sulle materie (.) è diverso (.) devono (1.5) più studiare non in modo (.) come facevamo noi una volta ma come::: (3.0) come posso dire

42. RICERCATRICE: forse non tanto i[contenuti]

43. PADRE: [i contenuti]

44. RICERCATRICE: [un metodo?]

45. PADRE: [sì un metodo]

46. RICERCATRICE: la scuola in generale ha fatto tanti cambiamenti un po’:::

47. PADRE: affrettati

48. MADRE: non abbiamo avuto il tempo di (.) regolarci in una fase che subito (.) sono subito passati alla successiva (.) non so (.) può darsi che sia buono (.) non so analizzare la cosa

certain difficulty in making sense of the change with respect to their own school experience (Excerpt 7, turn #43; Excerpt 19, turns #47 and #48), which is attached to an emotional vividness. Once the school was rigid but reassuring, schematic but stable, it is not only the student's Self that must adapt to the "hasty" change but also the Selves of the parents as former students.

The last aspect of the adult Educational Self is the polyphony related to the educational experiences emerging from the adults' discourse. An example of such polyphony is presented in Excerpt 20, which is taken from an interview with a family composed of a 12-year-old son, the father and the mother, both 45-year-old teachers. The sense of the school experience is expressed in the dialogue between the different voices of the Self, in this case the I-teacher and the I-father (Ligorio & Tateo, 2008).

When the father is asked to evaluate his son's school, the answer is expressed through an alliance of the I-positions of "father" and "teacher" (turn #31). Nevertheless, this evaluation calls into the picture the father's self-evaluation as a good teacher ("doing it with passion") and the whole set of knowledge derived from the personal school experiences in different moments of his lifetime ("pupils are different than in the past").

In short, the function of the Educational Self emerging from the excerpts is that of regulating and making sense of the adult's encounter with the school, through the activation of the specific symbolic repertoires related to the experience of having-been or

willing-to-be a successful or unsuccessful student (Excerpts 7, 18, and 19), parent (Excerpts 7 and 18), teacher or worker (Excerpt 20) with the related emotional and relational implications. The Educational Self is also used to make sense and to regulate some types of power relationships (Bruner, 1996), providing a framework to account for the teacher-student relationship (Excerpts 7, 18, and 19) and for the social value of the education (Excerpt 18). The Educational Self is a legacy of symbolic resources made of the set of knowledge, beliefs, narratives, and affective states established during the personal educational life. We can draw on it when participating as adults in an educational activity, playing different roles and functions, such as in school-family meetings.

The adult would thus activate the Educational Self—that is what has been defined here as the self-regulatory instance of the Self formed during the dialogical interaction in educational contexts—to make sense of the school experience of the child as a pupil but also of their own experience as parents or teachers.

The idea of Educational Self results from a dynamic, situated and dialogical process as underlined by the excerpts discussed. The definition of Educational Self has to do with the formation of Self during a critical stage in life. More in general, this is not a static entity but follows the same complex and fluid process of elaboration of the identity throughout the personal trajectory, in which "*what is*" is connected with "*what was*," "*what is not yet, but is about to come*" (Valsiner, 2009, p. 18). The analysis of school-family meetings provided some initial hints about how the polyphony

Excerpt 20: Interview #4

English translation:

30. RESEARCHER: what do you think about your children's school?

31. FATHER: **the school (1.5) for me as a teacher** and I have seen many schools (.) this school really works (.) I don't know all the teaching staff because the school works (.) if the teachers (.) understand the pupils(.) >believing in their own job< (.) **doing it with passion** (.) which is not always the case (.) in the school=world=like (.) elsewhere in our life and so (.) it depends on the teacher (.) **today the relationships with the pupils are different than in the past**

Italian original:

30. RICERCATRICE: cosa pensate della scuola che stanno frequentando i vostri figli?

31. PADRE: **la scuola (1.5) per me che sono un insegnante** e che ho visto parecchie scuole (.) questa è una scuola che realmente funziona (.) non conosco tutti gli insegnanti perché la scuola funziona (.) se ci sono gli insegnanti (.) che capiscono i ragazzi (.) >che credono nel loro lavoro< (.) **che lo fanno con passione** (.) il ché non è sempre riscontrabile (.) nel mondo=scolastico=come (.) in tutti i settori della nostra vita e quindi (.) dipende dall'insegnante (.) **oggi i rapporti con i ragazzi sono diversi rispetto al passato**

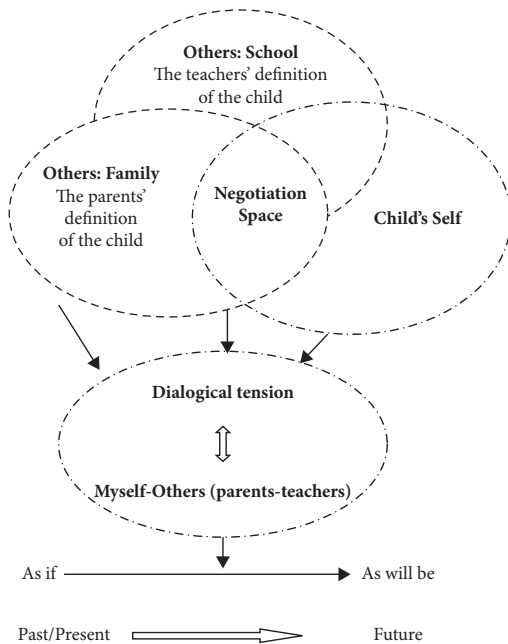


Figure 40.5 Negotiation space and dialogical tension.

of Educational Self would emerge from the process of active internalization and semiotic mediation of the significant adult voices that enter into contact with the child's idea of Self, in course of elaboration or as elaborated so far (see Figure 40.5).

The school-family meetings open a dialogical space where the different voices determine a dynamic system open to different “as-if” possibilities, contributing to defining what a person could be in future time. It is a space of dialogical tension characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty whose borders are permeable rather than rigid. It is a polyphonic space where the confrontation with significant others (myself-others) such as, for instance, parents and teachers activates a process of definition-redefinition-remodulation of the child's Self (Simao & Valsiner, 2007). It stimulates a dialogue and a process of definition and specification, stressed by both “what I think about Me” and by “what others think about Me.”

Conclusion: Still Standing on the Balcony

Why not to do a little exercise now? You just try to rewind the tape of the visual and virtual tour of the school. What do you see at this moment? The building, the entrance-hall, then the corridors and classrooms. Can you visualize the balcony? The metaphorical balcony on which we have been and where we explored the work of schooling was a

position neither comfortable nor usual, but now we can start again from here. Having a quick glance and using a renewed attention, we would probably realize that the walls of the school, first rigid, now seem more porous, plastic, and permeable. As the contours of cell membranes they let through some elements from sociocultural world. We would, then, recognize that the limited space of the balcony is a very dynamic open-ended system. It's a boundary, which, just as every liminal threshold, is a meeting place. From the balcony we can, finally assume a different angle to see what occurs inside the school. In this way, we would become aware that the work of schooling is constantly interwoven with several elements related to what there is on the outside of the balcony (in society), what happens beyond the balcony (in the school) and what happened or is happening on the balcony itself.

It's always refreshing to summarize, at the end of a long discussion, the main issues stressed.

Using the metaphor of a balcony we pointed out how the school is *a place in between*, a border always interfaced with both internal aspects (practices, discourses, and different actors) and a wider sociocultural climate. The school balcony, as a border zone, is an area of contact with other relevant educational settings. In order to grasp the dynamic and fluidity of this interconnection we need to look at boundary phenomena. A binocular vision focused on inside and outside school allows us to take in consideration the many processes implied in the work of schooling, moving from the role played by the socio-economic and cultural dimensions, passing through the analysis of intersectional points with others educational contexts (such as family-school meetings), arriving at the definition of identity in the school (the suggested notion of the Educational Self).

Looking across the balcony, for example, we highlighted which elements reach school, becoming fundamental factors in constructing school's everyday life. We outlined that the first element to be taken into account is the socio-economic dimension of cultural context in which school acts. We also stressed the relevant effects of families' social and cultural capital on children's school experience.

Paying attention to what happens on the balcony means, primarily, takes into account the intercontextual connection between school and other life contexts as in the case of home-school interactions. Such boundary encounters make evident the intricacy of the interpersonal dynamics in an institutional setting.

The school-family meetings take place in a particular time and space (just on the metaphorical school balcony) within specific “formal/informal” and “open/closed” parameters established by the school. Along these lines, three main modalities of interactional activities (Opposition, Alliance, and Acquiescence) emerge during the parents-teacher meetings that are strictly connected to the family’s socio-economic status and child’s school results.

We have also suggested an economically oriented view of the school-family meeting to stress what is actually at stake in this crossing boundary phenomenon. The different representations of education (multi-dimensionality versus mono-dimensionality) and school (instrumental versus holistic vision) evoked by parents and teachers and the child’s value (in terms of how much he is worth as a person and not only as a student) are the objects of negotiation or, more roughly, the indexes of stock exchange quotations becoming, to a certain extent, commodities.

As we have underlined, the meetings look really heuristically interesting also because it is possible to observe the twofold articulation of the Educational Self. On one hand, the teachers’ and parents’ discourses on school evaluation make explicit several definitions of the pupils’ Self. Such definitions provide a range of identity options that the child should negotiate and cope with during the critical process of constructing his/her Self. On the other hand, during school-family meetings, adults are asked to manage different activities, which is very meaningful from a psycho-social point of view. They have to make sense of the child’s school experience, account for his performance, negotiate between the family and school culture, etc. These activities require the recourse to the symbolic system of autobiographical and social knowledge related to their personal educational experience. Through the balcony metaphor we can look with a new lens at current work of schooling, at its complexity and at its unavoidable interconnections with the broader cultural paradigms of a given society. Studying these extremely complex systems of relationships between inside and outside the school require the researchers to stand exactly on the balcony in spite of the rain or the heat.

Future Directions

It seems to us that a common trace can be identified throughout our discussion. In this chapter, in fact, we have made an attempt to go beyond a

static vision of schooling, stressing concepts such as “boundary process,” “psychological membranes,” “intercontextual dynamics,” and “intersection points.” In a way, we have pointed out the movement and the openness rather than the static nature and the closure. It’s precisely this “being in between” that should be further explored. By standing on the border and by facing constantly the tension among different parts of the system, new intriguing research questions come forward:

- 1) How to develop theoretically the *balcony metaphor* and its implication in studying boundary conditions? In order to expand the Border Zone concept with respect to the home-school interaction, which other crossing boundary phenomena should one consider? There are many other different intersection points between school and family that could be empirically explored. One of these occurs when the parents accompany their child to the school. What happens during this daily entrance in the school’s territory? What kind of social processes take place on the liminal threshold constituted by the entrance-hall? Which are the institutional rules ordering this scholastic daily routine and under which conditions are they violated? What is admitted, what is rejected, or just tolerated on this border? In other words, what passes through the balcony and what does not?
- 2) Which types of experiences make the emergence of the Educational Self possible? The reciprocity of the relationships in motion (Past-Present-Future) and the dialogical nature of each “I” position in motion (the ambivalence between to-be and to-become) must be explored with respect to the formation of student’s Educational Self. Besides, how can we grasp the “polyphony of voices” affecting the definition of Self in others’ educational activities and experiences inside and outside the school?
- 3) How can one explore the regulatory function of the Educational Self at the level of social roles and power relationships? It represents, indeed, the framework both for the selection of the possible Selves to be constructed by the child within certain cultural parameters and for the regulation of social relationships and social valorization of the education within a given society.
- 4) Which is the role played by the Educational Self in the adulthood? How does it “work”? To understand the idea of adult Educational Self could be useful to study its reactivation when the person

is involved in an educational activity, for example, during significant turning points and transitions in life, such as higher education or professional training activities.

5) How to reveal the ambiguity of the measurement system used by the school in the evaluation report card? Are those measures (such as the marks) an instrument to commoditize the education? How does this translation of the complex educational process occur? What could be lost or added? Is the translation system clear or is it only outwardly evident? And to whom?

6) Which communicative strategies the school could be improved to make the meeting with the family more effective? Could they be constituted by “interaction protocols,” helpful in reformulating both conflict and acquiescence interactions?

Appendix: Transcription Conventions

The transcription of school-family meetings and interviews is in line with the conventions of Jefferson’s (1985) Conversational Analysis.

.	descending tone
,	ascending tone
?	interrogative tone
:::	extension of preceding sound (proportional to the number of colons)
-	sound or word interruption
=	no articulation between words
—	(underlined) emphasis on the words underlined
M	(capital letters) increase of volume
° °	the words between these signs are whispered
> <	the words between these signs are pronounced in an accelerating tone
< >	the words between these signs are pronounced in a decelerating tone
()	the words between these signs are not perfectly comprehensible. The brackets are empty when the talk is absolutely unintelligible

(())	short annotations about extra-verbal or contextual elements are reported in double-round brackets
-------	---

[beginning of juxtaposition of speakers; the square brackets are vertically aligned
---	--

]	end of juxtaposition of speakers
---	----------------------------------

.h	heavy inspiration
----	-------------------

h.	heavy expiration
----	------------------

(0.2)	length of pause in seconds
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(.)	pause shorter than 0.2 seconds
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Notes

1. The chapter is the result of a shared reflection of the authors. However, Antonio Iannaccone wrote the paragraphs entitled “Homeostatic functions of the school,” “Maintaining status-quo of society,” “Some practical implications,” “Types of interactions, family’s socio-economic status, and school results.” Giuseppina Marsico wrote the introduction, the other paragraphs, conclusion, and future research’s directions.

2. In architectural terms the balcony is a part of the building that protrudes outward. It’s an element added to the body of the building, a sort of platform beyond the outer wall boundary. Therefore, the balcony enables the relations with adjacent surroundings. For this reason we can define the balcony as a real social space, a place to meet and exchange where many social events occur. As an example, one of the authors (Marsico) reports some “snapshots” of life during her childhood. Many times she has seen her mother calling their neighbor across the balcony to borrow, for example, eggs for a cake and then give her a piece once the cake was prepared by passing the tray from one balcony to another. Many other times she has seen her mother on the balcony chatting with a neighbor of micro-events that had occurred in the little world of the neighborhood. In a sense, the balcony was a venue for exchanging gossip that performs the function of maintenance of the social order. She herself repeatedly has observed from the balcony the neighbor across, accessing daily to a series of actions and to life that flowed in the opposite house.

3. The research was realized in a middle school in the South of Italy.

4. Year 8 in the Italian educational system, which requires assessment in years 5, 8, and 13.

5. The authors are grateful to Luca Tateo for his participation in defining the emergence of adult’s Educational Self and in commenting on the related excerpts discussed in the chapters.

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AQ2: Please check the placement of Excerpts are ok.

AQ3: We have deleted the credit line “modified after Valsiner, 2007” from the figure because the caption already has a credit line.