

Negotiating “readiness” across educational boundaries: A conversation-analytic study of Parent–Teacher Conferences in the primary-secondary school transition

Chiara Dalledonne Vandini*, Università di Bologna, Department of Education Studies “Giovanni Maria Bertin”, Italy

Davide Cino, University of Milano-Bicocca, Department of Human Sciences for Education “Riccardo Massa”, Italy

Corresponding author: chiara.dalledonne2@unibo.it

Abstract

The transition from primary to secondary school marks a pivotal moment in children’s educational trajectories. For parents and teachers, it entails not only administrative change but the negotiation of developmental expectations, identities, and responsibilities. Drawing on recorded and transcribed parent–teacher conferences, this study employs Conversation Analysis to examine how adults collaboratively construct the notion of a “successful transition.” The analysis reveals that such transitions are treated as evaluative moments in which past performance is reinterpreted through the lens of future secondary-school demands. Teachers mobilise discourses of readiness and autonomy, while parents display alignment or resistance through affiliative or justificatory moves. These interactions invoke broader cultural norms of parental responsibility and professional accountability, shaping the child’s institutional pathway. The paper argues that educational transitions are not merely structural passages but interactional accomplishments, co-producing institutional discourses of development and competence. By illuminating the micro-dynamics of these encounters, the study shows how “readiness” is not merely assessed but interactionally produced as a moral and institutional category, shaping both children’s educational trajectories and the distribution of responsibility between parents and teachers.

Keywords

conversation analysis, educational transitions, parent–teacher conferences, school readiness, institutional interaction

1 Introduction: Educational transitions as a research problem

Educational transitions are widely recognised as critical turning points in the educational trajectories of young people (Ecclestone et al., 2010). Among these, the transition from primary to secondary school occupies a particularly salient position. It entails far more than a change of buildings, curricular structures, or peer networks; it introduces new norms of autonomy, accountability, and performance, reshaping how children are positioned—as learners, as social actors, and as future students (Pratt & George, 2005; Topping, 2011). This transition has been shown to affect academic achievement (Galton, Gray & Ruddock, 1999), emotional and social adjustment (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008), and

longer-term educational outcomes (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Yet transitions are not merely institutional or psychological events, but interactional accomplishments shaped in talk: across classrooms, staff discussions, and, crucially, parent–teacher conversations where ideas of “readiness,” “maturity,” and “independence” are invoked, negotiated, and made consequential (Youdell, 2006; Corsaro & Molinari, 2005). These encounters are interactional spaces where adults co-construct educational futures and negotiate responsibility, while simultaneously enacting and redefining the roles of the child, the teacher, and the parent. (Caronia, 2024; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Vincent & Ball, 2007). Much of the existing literature has focused on children’s perspectives on transition, namely their experience of school-related anxieties,



peer dynamics, or institutional discontinuities (Zeedyk et al., 2003; Hanewald, 2013). Far less attention has been paid to the interactional processes through which adults (i.e., teachers and parents) make sense of and manage these transitions collaboratively. Parent-teacher conferences, especially at key transition points, offer a privileged site for examining how developmental expectations and trajectories are discursively co-constructed. (Brennan & MacRuairc, 2011; Gordon & Lahelma, 2003; Greenfield et al., 2000).

The present study approaches these conferences not merely as administrative routines or information-sharing events, but as institutional encounters in which educational futures are talked into being (Heritage, 1982). This article explores precisely these conversations, focusing on the parent-teacher conference as a key institutional site where transitions are negotiated. While such conferences are often seen as occasions for the exchange of information, by both teachers reporting on a child's progress, and parents contributing contextual knowledge from home, they are in fact much richer and more complex events (Caronia, 2022; Cedersund & Svensson, 1996). They are moments where identities are displayed and negotiated, responsibility is distributed, and the future is projected into the present. By examining the interactional details of these encounters, we gain insight into how the categories of "good parent" and "good teacher" are constituted, and how developmental goals such as independence, maturity, and organisation are mobilised to evaluate children and guide parental and professional conduct (Pillet-Shore, 2012; 2015). This study builds on a growing body of work that understands education not merely as a matter of policy or instruction, but as something accomplished through everyday interaction. Conversation Analysis (CA) provides a particularly fruitful lens for this endeavour, as it allows us to examine how meanings and responsibilities are constructed turn by turn in the unfolding of talk. Through CA, we can observe how teachers frame children's behaviours in relation to future demands, how parents position themselves as responsible and caring, and how both parties manage the delicacies of critique, encouragement, and advice. These practices may appear mundane,

but they carry profound implications for how transitions are understood and experienced.

Against this background, the article's aim is to specify *how the primary-to-secondary transition is interactionally produced as a moral and practical problem of readiness*. We examine how teachers make future secondary-school demands relevant in the here-and-now, and how parents align with, negotiate, or resist these formulations while maintaining an identity of 'good parenting'. Our contribution is therefore twofold: (i) we demonstrate how 'readiness' is accomplished as an accountable outcome that *shapes what the transition is* (rather than merely describing it), and (ii) we show how parental involvement is discursively recalibrated through dilemmas of care (support vs stepping back), thereby distributing responsibility across home and school.

The focus on parent-teacher conferences during the primary-to-secondary transition also highlights broader cultural logics of education. In many contemporary Western educational contexts, there is a strong emphasis on preparing children for the future, cultivating autonomy, and fostering self-management. These ideals take concrete form in the language of teachers and parents, in how they frame children's development, and in the responsibilities they mutually assign to each other. Conferences, thus, become microcosms of broader educational discourses, sites where the values of *readiness*, independence, and responsibility are enacted in everyday interaction. Central to these negotiations are cultural notions of "developmental goals": what counts as appropriate progress, readiness, or maturity for the secondary level. In this context, "readiness" denotes not an objective state but a discursively constructed judgment about children's capacity to align with the behavioural, cognitive, and moral norms of the next educational stage.

Indeed, developmental goals are not mere technical benchmarks but are imbued with cultural assumptions about childhood, responsibility, and success. They function as moral as well as pedagogical yardsticks, making their negotiation inseparable from that of identity. In parent-teacher conferences, participants continually orient to what it means to be a "good parent" or a "good teacher."

These identities are not static attributes but emergent accomplishments, achieved moment by moment in conversation. Through this lens, transitions are examined not as abstract institutional passages but as situated accomplishments unfolding in everyday talk.

More specifically, the article examines how “readiness” is interactionally constructed as a central criterion for educational transition. By focusing on how developmental goals are invoked, negotiated, and made consequential in talk, the study shows how readiness operates as a moral and institutional category that organises expectations, distributes responsibility, and shapes the child’s projected educational trajectory.

2 Developmental goals in education as interactional objects

From a conversation-analytic perspective, developmental goals are treated as interactional categories whose meaning is produced and negotiated within the unfolding organisation of talk. In parent–teacher conferences, terms such as *maturity*, *independence*, or *readiness* do not function as fixed diagnostic labels. Rather, they operate as discursive resources through which participants account for children’s current performances, project expectations for future schooling, and position themselves within the institutional framework of the conference. In this sense, these categories are inherently indexical (Heritage, 1984): their meaning is contingent on the sequential environment in which they are invoked and on the social actions they are designed to accomplish. In parent–teacher conferences, terms such as *maturity*, *independence*, or *readiness* do not function as fixed diagnostic labels; instead, they operate as discursive resources through which participants justify current performances, project future expectations, and position themselves within institutional frameworks. These categories may be understood as indexical, aligning with Heritage (1984): their meaning is contingent on the sequential environment in which they are invoked, and on the social actions they are designed to accomplish.

Although primary schools typically encourage direct parental engagement, second-

ary schools expect greater student autonomy and may implicitly discourage close parental monitoring (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). This shift produces tensions in parental identity. On the one hand, parents are expected to continue supporting their child’s education; on the other, they risk being “labelled” as over-involved or intrusive if they intervene too heavily (Pillet-Shore, 2016). Vincent and Tomlinson (1997) describe this as the paradox of the “good parent” in education: simultaneously responsible and restrained. Parent–teacher conferences are sites where this paradox is enacted, as parents must display both commitment and deference to professional expertise, as well as compliance with institutional power. In some communities, parental authority is constrained by linguistic or institutional barriers, while in others it is bolstered by strong communal networks (Sayed & Soudien, 2005). These variations remind us that the “good parent” is not a universal figure but a locally constructed identity, negotiated in interaction with teachers and institutional discourses. Just as parents are held accountable to ideals of “good parenting,” teachers are measured against ideals of professionalism and pedagogical responsibility. The literature on teacher professionalism highlights a tension between technical competence (subject knowledge, pedagogy, assessment) and moral responsibility (care, fairness, commitment) (Hargreaves, 2000; Goodwin, 1994). In transition contexts, teachers are expected to assess readiness, identify risks, and communicate expectations to families (Pillet-Shore, 2012; 2015). Parent–teacher conferences at the transition point therefore become sites where these professional identities intersect, overlap, and sometimes conflict (Dalledonne Vandini & Cino, 2023). Much of the existing research on educational transitions has approached this process in terms of psychological adjustment, academic outcomes, or risk factors affecting children’s development (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). While these perspectives provide important insights into the challenges associated with transition, they tend to treat readiness as an individual attribute or outcome. By contrast, the present study examines how readiness is interactionally constructed in everyday encounters be-

tween parents and teachers, thereby shifting the analytical focus from individual traits to situated practices of meaning-making.

3 The present study

The present study examines the fine-grained organisation of talk-in-interaction in parent-teacher conferences to reveal how participants manage delicate issues, display (dis)agreement, and orient to institutional roles. This approach provides a way to understand transitions not as abstract processes but as lived, talk-based accomplishments, based on the following research questions:

- RQ1: How are developmental goals invoked and negotiated in parent-teacher conferences during the transition from primary to secondary school?
- RQ2: How are the identities of the “good parent” and the “good teacher” interactionally accomplished and contested?
- RQ3: What do these negotiations reveal about the institutional logics that underpin educational transitions?

3.1 Conversation Analysis as a methodological framework

To answer its research question, this study adopts Conversation Analysis (CA) as its central methodological approach. Originating from the work of Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), CA provides a rigorous framework for examining the sequential organisation of talk-in-interaction. At its core, CA assumes that social order is produced through participants’ orientations to turn-taking, repair, and sequence organisation. Rather than treating talk as a mere reflection of external social structures, CA demonstrates how institutions are enacted and reproduced in interaction. In the context of parent-teacher conferences, CA is particularly well-suited because these encounters are simultaneously institutional and interpersonal (Heritage & Lindstrom, 1998). They involve asymmetries of knowledge, authority, and responsibility, but are also infused with relational concerns such as building rapport, mitigating face threats, and displaying care (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). By analysing how participants accomplish these tasks moment by moment, CA allows us

to see how educational transitions are constructed as practical accomplishments.

Although CA traditionally emphasises analytic neutrality and a commitment to participants’ own orientations (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1997), it is essential to recognise that research practices are never neutral or objective. The processes of selecting excerpts, transcribing data, and framing findings within academic discourse entail interpretive decisions that reflect particular epistemological and theoretical positions (Heritage, 1984; Wetherell, 1998). In this study, attention to developmental goals and identity construction is informed by an interest in how institutional settings organise accountability and normative expectations (Garfinkel, 1967; Lepper & Woolgar, 2002). Categories such as “good parent” or “good teacher” are thus approached not as pre-existing entities, but as interactionally produced and negotiated within local contexts. Reflexivity in this research also extends to its cultural dimensions. Norms surrounding parental involvement and teacher professionalism vary across cultural and institutional contexts (Alexander, 2001; Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa, 2009). Consequently, the analysis does not treat categories such as “maturity” or “independence” as universal constructs. Instead, it attends to how these categories are mobilised, made relevant, or contested by participants in situated interaction. At the same time, by highlighting recurrent practices, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions about educational transitions, while acknowledging the inherent limitations of generalising from contextually specific data (Flyvbjerg, 2006). By adopting this approach, the study aims to show how developmental goals such as readiness are not pre-given criteria but interactional accomplishments through which institutional expectations are enacted, negotiated, and made consequential.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The data for this study consist of audio-recorded parent-teacher conferences, formal institutional encounters concerning children at the end of primary school, preparing to transition to lower secondary school. In the Italian school context, the meetings analysed in this study are commonly referred to as *colloqui scuola-famiglia* or *colloqui con i genitori*.

ri. These conferences constitute a routine form of communication between teachers and parents and are regularly organised by schools during the academic year, in accordance with national regulations that encourage structured interaction between families and teachers. Parents are typically informed in advance through school communication channels (e.g., the school diary, digital platforms, or circular messages), and they usually book an appointment within a designated time window rather than being summoned to a fixed time.

The conferences are led by the teacher and generally aim to discuss the child's academic progress, behaviour in class, and learning difficulties, as well as to provide guidance to parents about how to support the child's development. In the final year of primary school, these meetings also acquire a particular relevance because they take place shortly before the transition to *scuola secondaria di primo grado* (lower secondary school). While the conferences do not involve formal decisions about school placement, teachers frequently use them to project expectations about the demands of secondary schooling and to discuss aspects of students' autonomy, organisation, and study habits that may become consequential in the upcoming transition. Conferences typically occur during the final months of the school year, when both teachers and parents are oriented to the child's preparation for the next stage of schooling. The corpus includes 12 conferences specifically addressing this transition, drawn from a larger dataset of 47 video-recorded meetings collected in two primary schools located in suburban areas of Padova and Bologna, Italy. This sub-sample was purposively selected because it explicitly addresses matters of readiness, progress, and future expectations, thus providing a rich site for examining developmental goals.

To minimise disruption, unobtrusive recording devices were placed in the room (GoPro 4). This ensured that the interactions unfolded as naturally as possible within the institutional setting. For the purposes of this paper, a subset of excerpts has been selected to illustrate recurring interactional phenomena. These excerpts were chosen not for their representativeness, but for their analytic and theoretical richness in displaying how developmental goals and identities are negotiated

(Drew & Heritage, 1992). Like any qualitative study, this project is shaped by the scope of its data. The corpus is limited to conferences conducted in specific schools within a particular educational system. While the findings offer insights into general processes of negotiation, they cannot be taken as representative of all contexts. Moreover, because the conferences involve teachers and parents rather than children, the analysis foregrounds adult perspectives. Nonetheless, the dataset provides a rare window into naturally occurring interactions at a critical juncture in educational vertical and horizontal trajectories. By focusing on the fine-grained organisation of talk, the study is able to reveal dynamics that are often overlooked in self-report research.

The present study was conducted in accordance with widely recognised ethical standards in educational research (BERA, 2018; Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including explicit written permission for audio and video recording as well as transcription. Confidentiality was ensured through the systematic use of pseudonyms, and any potentially identifying details—such as names of institutions, subjects, or specific characteristics of children—were removed or altered. This approach was particularly important given that the data involve discussions of children's abilities, challenges, and personal circumstances. The video recordings collected for this study are stored on secure institutional servers and are not publicly accessible in order to protect participants' privacy. Access to the video data is restricted to the research team at the University of Bologna directly involved in the project. Transcripts derived from the recordings are also stored securely and can be accessed only by members of the same research group for the purposes of scientific analysis. Any excerpts reproduced in the article have been anonymised, and identifying details have been removed to ensure participants' confidentiality.

3.3 Data transcription

The recordings were transcribed by the author and subsequently checked against the original video data. Transcription was carried out manually and involved repeated listening to the recordings in order to capture the details of the interaction as accurately as possible.

The transcripts follow the conventions of conversation-analytic transcription developed by Jefferson (2004), which aim to represent relevant features of naturally occurring talk in written form. These conventions make visible aspects of the interaction that are central to conversation-analytic research, including pauses, overlaps, elongations, cut-offs, emphasis, and other prosodic or temporal features that contribute to the organisation of social action in talk. By rendering such details visible, Jeffersonian transcription allows the analysis to attend to how participants design their turns and coordinate actions moment by moment. Because the interactions analysed in this study were originally conducted in Italian, excerpts are presented in both the original language and an English translation. Providing the Italian original allows readers to examine lexical choices and interactional formulations that may be consequential for the analysis, while the English translation aims to remain as close as possible to the original wording while preserving the social action performed in the turn.

4 Findings

The following sections present a series of excerpts from parent-teacher conferences recorded at the end of primary school (5th grade). Each excerpt is presented in transcription format (simplified Jeffersonian conventions data (Jefferson, 2004), followed by sequential analysis. By focusing on developmental goals, we aim to show how abstract ideas of development become consequential for children's futures through everyday talk. The goal is to illustrate how parents and teachers negotiate developmental goals, construct identities of the "good parent" and the "good teacher," and accomplish the transition as an interactional event.

Excerpt 1: "Readiness for independence"

Transcript

(Teacher = T; Parent = P)

- 1) **T: so (.) as we look ahead to next year, (.) one thing that will be important**

T: allora (.) guardando al prossimo anno, (.) una cosa importante

- 2) **is how Luca manages his own homework.**

Sarà come Luca gestisce i compiti da solo.

- 3) **P: mmhm.**

P: mhm.

- 4) **T: in secondary school, teachers will not remind him every day.**

T: alle medie, gli insegnanti non glielo ricorderanno ogni giorno.

- 5) **P: yes (.) at home I usually check with him after dinner, you know, (.)**

P: sì (.) a casa di solito controllo con lui dopo cena, sai, (.)

- 6) **but sometimes he says he's already done it.**

Però a volte dice che li ha già fatti.

- 7) **T: right, right. (.) And does he usually complete it?**

T: giusto, giusto. (.) E di solito li completa?

- 8) **P: well (.) mostly yes, (.) though sometimes it's a struggle.**

P: beh (.) per lo più sì, (.) anche se a volte fa un po' fatica.

- 9) **T: okay (.) so that's an area to keep supporting, (.)**

T: ok (.) quindi è un aspetto su cui continuare a lavorare, (.)

- 10) **because independence is really key in the first months.**

Perché l'autonomia è davvero fondamentale nei primi mesi.

This excerpt illustrates how teachers invoke future-oriented developmental goals. The teacher frames "independence" in doing homework (lines 1–4, 9–10) as a criterion for readiness. The shift from the present ("manages his own homework") to the future ("in secondary school, teachers will not remind him") situates the child's current behaviour within an anticipatory trajectory. Independence is constructed as a key dimension of readiness, linking present behaviour to the expectations associated with the transition to secondary school. The parent aligns with the teacher's framing by offering an account of the family's current practices at home (lines 5–6). In doing so, she displays what can be described as responsibilized alignment: rather than resisting the teacher's assessment, she elaborates it with a narrative that demonstrates her own investment in the developmental project at hand. Her statement, "I usually check with him after dinner," presents a routine of supervision that positions her as a caring and attentive parent, some-

one who takes educational responsibilities seriously and collaborates with the school's expectations (Backer & Keogh, 1995). This self-presentation resonates with broader cultural models of "involved parenting," where good parenthood is equated with active engagement in the child's learning processes within a broader intensive parenting framework (Dalledonne Vandini & Cino, 2023). Yet within the same utterance, the parent also introduces a subtle tension. The phrase "but sometimes it's a struggle" acknowledges that the child's independence is only partial, and that parental involvement remains necessary. This admission is delicately balanced: it maintains the parent's credibility (she knows her child's limits, she monitors him closely) while implicitly inviting the teacher's understanding of the difficulties inherent in fostering independence at this age, presenting herself as a responsible parent aware of her child's ability. The teacher's response "okay ... independence is really key in the first months" both accepts this contribution and reasserts professional authority by defining the moral of the exchange. Through this turn, the teacher transforms the specific example into a general principle: independence is not simply desirable, but essential for the child's successful adaptation to the secondary school environment. From an interactional perspective, the teacher's "okay" (line 9) operates as a discursive pivot. It acknowledges the parent's display of responsibility, but it simultaneously re-centres the normative frame of the institution. The teacher's authority is reaffirmed using a generic formulation—"independence is really key"—that elevates the discussion from a single child's experience to a general "pedagogical truth". What is achieved here is a subtle alignment between the teacher's professional discourse and the parent's moral discourse: both parties converge on the ideal of fostering independence, albeit from different positions within the institutional order.

However, this apparently shared understanding conceals a significant ambiguity. The very notion of independence is neither stable nor self-evident. Within educational contexts, it functions as what Silverman (1997) calls a "floating moral category": a value that appears universally positive but is open to multiple, and sometimes contradictory, inter-

pretations. For teachers, independence often signifies the ability to self-regulate, complete homework without prompting, and manage organisational tasks autonomously. For parents, by contrast, independence is negotiated within the emotional and relational dynamics of care: allowing a child to act alone may be felt as risky, even neglectful, especially if failure could lead to embarrassment or sanction within the school.

In this sense, the transcript captures a micro-moment in which the boundaries of independence are actively negotiated. The teacher's formulation casts independence as an institutional requirement, linked to the organisational complexity of secondary school. The parent's account, meanwhile, situates independence within the domestic sphere, as something to be cultivated through routine and reassurance. These perspectives do not oppose each other outright, but they reflect different moral economies of care: one grounded in institutional efficiency, the other in affective protection.

The sequence thus illustrates that "independence" is not a singular developmental achievement but a relationally defined competence, contingent on the expectations and resources of adults. This conversation also exposes the paradox inherent in the discourse of autonomy within modern schooling. Independence is portrayed as a prerequisite for success, yet the processes designed to produce it often require sustained guidance and scaffolding from adults. In this sense, the pursuit of autonomy generates dependence on particular pedagogical and parental forms of support. By checking homework after dinner (line 5), the parent enacts what might be called *guided independence*: she allows the child a degree of self-management while maintaining oversight. This hybrid practice reveals the limits of the binary between dependence and independence. Children's autonomy, especially at the transition to adolescence, is always negotiated and partial, sustained by invisible forms of support. The teacher's framing risks naturalising independence as an individual trait, while the parent's account reminds us that autonomy is relationally achieved and contextually maintained. As Foucault (1982) reminds us, freedom and discipline are not opposites but intertwined; to become autonomous within institutional

settings is to internalise the norms that define autonomy. The teacher's insistence that independence is "key" thus performs a dual function: it expresses care for the child's future while reproducing the institutional expectation that students should self-regulate according to school standards.

Excerpt 2: "*The question of behaviour*"

Transcript

(Teacher = T; Parent = P)

- 1) **T: Sometimes in class Marco is very lively (.) which is wonderful in terms of**

T: A volte in classe Marco è molto vivace (.) il che è positivo in termini di

- 2) **energy, (.) but in secondary school they will expect him to settle more quickly.**

Energia, però alle medie si aspetteranno che si calmi più rapidamente.

- 3) **P: Oh yes (.) at home too he's always active (.) we try to channel that into sport.**

P: Ah sì, anche a casa è sempre attivo. Cerchiamo di incanalare questa energia nello sport.

- 4) **T: mmhm.**

T: mhm.

- 5) **P: he plays football three times a week.**

P: gioca a calcio tre volte a settimana.

- 6) **T: That's excellent (.) it gives him structure. (.) but in class, (.) he'll need to**

T: ottimo (.) gli dà struttura. (.) però in classe (.) dovrà

- 7) **learn when it's time to focus.**

Imparare quando è il momento di concentrarsi.

In this excerpt, the teacher initiates the discussion by describing Marco as "very lively," a formulation that performs a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, the adjective "lively" is affectively positive, indexing vitality, energy, and engagement: qualities typically associated with a healthy, active child. On the other hand, the addition of "but in secondary school they will expect him to settle more quickly" immediately repositions that same liveliness as potentially problematic in an institutional context governed by rules, order, and self-discipline. Through this subtle contrast, the teacher transforms an ostensibly neutral observation about temperament into

a future-oriented behavioural concern. Here, behavioural regulation is implicitly framed as a component of readiness, with the child's ability to "settle" serving as a criterion for a successful transition. This rhetorical strategy exemplifies the *hedging of evaluation* typical in parent-teacher talk (Pillet-Shore, 2016). By first celebrating Marco's energy and only subsequently invoking the need for control, the teacher mitigates the face-threatening act of criticism while simultaneously introducing a normative standard. The phrase "they will expect him to settle more quickly" also serves a distancing function: by attributing the expectation to the anonymous "they" of secondary school teachers, the speaker deflects personal responsibility for the critique and instead aligns with institutional norms. The authority of the institution thus enters the conversation implicitly, shaping the moral horizon of acceptable behaviour without requiring explicit admonition.

The parent responds in immediate alignment, both linguistically and morally. Her utterance—"oh yes, at home too he's always active, we try to channel that into sport" (line 3)—echoes the teacher's description while reframing activity as something positive and managed. The parent's use of the verb *channel* is revealing; it constructs the child's energy as a natural force that requires direction, containment, and transformation. In doing so, the parent demonstrates her awareness of institutional expectations and her participation in the shared project of behavioural regulation. The subsequent elaboration, "he plays football three times a week" (line 5), provides concrete evidence of this responsible parenting. The regularity and structure implied by "three times a week" perform parental diligence and discipline by proxy. When the teacher responds, "that's excellent, it gives him structure, but in class he'll need to learn when it's time to focus" (lines 6–7), the exchange shifts from mutual alignment to a subtle reassertion of professional authority. The teacher's initial praise, "that's excellent," acknowledges the parent's efforts and preserves rapport, yet the subsequent conjunction *but* reintroduces an institutional imperative: however beneficial sports may be, they cannot replace the need for self-regulation in the classroom. The teacher, thus, delineates

the boundaries between family-managed discipline and school-required control. Ultimately, the responsibility for ensuring that Marco can “focus” rests with the child himself, albeit under the school’s evaluative gaze.

Interactionally, this sequence reveals how ideals of self-control and rule compliance are naturalised through seemingly benign exchanges. The teacher does not explicitly invoke the language of rules or discipline; instead, behavioural expectations are framed through the moral vocabulary of development and readiness. Phrases like “learn when it’s time to focus” transform the act of compliance into a developmental milestone, a skill to be acquired as part of growing up. The teacher’s formulation, therefore, does more than describe what Marco should do; it articulates a broader model of the “good pupil” as one who possesses the capacity to modulate energy and to distinguish between moments of permitted expressiveness and those that require restraint. In projecting this model into the secondary school environment—“they will expect him to settle more quickly” (line 2)—the teacher positions behavioural control as a form of symbolic capital necessary for successful integration into a more demanding institutional setting. Readiness for secondary school, in this sense, is equated not with academic mastery alone but with the internalisation of behavioral discipline.

Excerpt 3: “Academic performance and parental justification”

Transcript

(Teacher = T; Parent = P)

- 1) **T: In mathematics, he’s doing fine with basic operations, (.) but word**

T: in matematica, se la cava bene con le operazioni di base, (.) però i problemi

- 2) **problems are still a difficulty.**

Con il testo sono ancora difficile.

- 3) **P: yes (.) sometimes he gets nervous when there’s a lot of text.**

P: sì (.) a volte si innervosisce quando c’è molto da leggere.

- 4) **T: mmhm.**

T: mhm.

- 5) **P: I think it’s partly because he reads more slowly, (.) we’re working on it.**

P: penso sia anche perché legge più lentamente. Ci stiamo lavorando.

- 6) **T: right, (.) so in secondary school they’ll give longer texts, so building confidence**

T: Giusto, (.) alle medie i testi saranno più lunghi, quindi è importante costruire fiducia

- 7) **is important (.)**

È importante.

In this excerpt, the teacher opens with a balanced evaluation, describing the child’s mathematical ability as generally satisfactory yet limited when it comes to word problems. The parent immediately takes up this assessment and provides an account that recontextualizes the difficulty: “sometimes he gets nervous when there’s a lot of text” (line 3). This response is more than mere agreement: it represents a strategic move in which the parent demonstrates firsthand, experiential knowledge of the child (Dalledonne Vandini & Cino, 2020b). By referring to the child’s nervousness—a state observable at home rather than in school—the mother asserts epistemic authority grounded in everyday familiarity. In doing so, she subtly rebalances the asymmetry of the encounter. While the teacher possesses professional and institutional knowledge, the parent brings intimate, embodied knowledge of the child’s emotions, habits, and reactions. This appeal to personal observation serves a dual function: it validates the teacher’s concern while reframing the issue from a matter of academic limitation to one of emotional response. The difficulty is thus psychologized rather than intellectualized: it is linked to anxiety and reading speed rather than to ability or comprehension. This reframing protects the child’s image and, by extension, the parent’s moral identity as competent and attentive.

The continuation, “we’re working on it” (line 5), reinforces this responsible stance. The use of the plural pronoun *we* constructs the parent–child relationship as a cooperative effort and positions the mother as actively engaged in remediation. Rather than passively receiving the teacher’s evaluation, the parent transforms it into evidence of her ongoing involvement. In doing so, she embodies the role of the “good parent” who recognizes the child’s weaknesses and takes steps to address them. The teacher’s response, “so in second-

ary school they'll give longer texts, so building confidence is important" (lines 6–7) accepts and extends the mother's framing. By focusing on "confidence," the teacher translates the parent's psychological account into a developmental goal, one that fits the institutional discourse of preparation and self-efficacy. The child's difficulty is thus reinterpreted as an issue of readiness, to be addressed by developing confidence in anticipation of future academic demands. The issue is no longer a static problem but a stage in a future-oriented trajectory.

This short sequence thus encapsulates how academic challenges are collaboratively negotiated and morally neutralized. By invoking first-hand knowledge, the parent reclaims a degree of authority within the asymmetrical structure of the conference. At the same time, the teacher, by recontextualizing the issue within an educational trajectory, reaffirms institutional legitimacy. Together, they convert a potential deficit into shared developmental work: a process that maintains harmony, preserves identities, and reaffirms the collaborative ideal of the parent-teacher partnership (Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Garcia-Sanchez & Orellana, 2006).

Excerpt 4: "Negotiating responsibility"

Transcript

(Teacher = T; Parent = P)

- 1) **T: sometimes, when he forgets his materials, we notice that he looks to you**
T: a volte, quando dimentica il materiale, notiamo che guarda a lei
- 2) **for reminders.**
per avere un promemoria.
- 3) **P: yes (.) I usually prepare the bag with him in the morning.**
P: sì (.) di solito preparo lo zaino con lui al mattino.
- 4) **T: mmhm.**
T: mhm.
- 5) **P: I'm worried that if I don't, he'll go to school without the things he needs.**
P: ho paura che se non lo faccio, venga a scuola senza le cose.
- 6) **T: I see. (.) but maybe now is a good time to let him take more responsibility.**
T: capisco (.) però forse questo è un buon momento per lasciargli più responsabilità.

- 7) **P: (.) right (.) so you suggest I step back a little.**

P: (.) giusto (.) quindi suggerisci di fare un passo indietro un po'.

- 8) **T: exactly (.) so that he develops autonomy before next year.**

T: esatto (.) così sviluppa autonomia prima dell'anno prossimo.

In this excerpt, the teacher raises the issue of responsibility in a way that is both factual and evaluative: "sometimes, when he forgets his materials, we notice that he looks to you for reminders" (lines 1–2). This opening statement implicitly attributes the child's forgetfulness to a pattern of dependence, thereby identifying both a behavioural issue and a familial dynamic. The teacher's wording "we notice" indexes collective professional observation rather than personal judgement, lending institutional weight to the assessment while maintaining politeness. The parent's immediate response, "yes, I usually prepare the bag with him in the morning" (line 3), is a revealing act of self-presentation. She accepts the observation without defensiveness, but frames her involvement as an expression of care and a sense of preventive responsibility. By emphasizing her routine of preparing the bag "with him," she constructs her role as collaborative rather than controlling, subtly resisting the implication of overprotection. Her next turn, "I'm worried that if I don't, he'll go to school without things" (line 5) exposes the emotional underpinning of her actions: a fear of failure that is as much social and moral as practical. Forgetting materials would not only inconvenience the child but might also reflect poorly on her as a parent. From a sequential perspective, the parent's turn can be understood as an account that emerges in response to the teacher's minimal acknowledgement in line 4. Although the teacher's response is brief and somewhat dispreferred, it nonetheless provides the interactional environment in which the parent elaborates on the child's behaviour. The account therefore does not occur independently but is sequentially shaped by the teacher's prior turn, reflecting the parent's orientation to the teacher's evaluation and the need to provide an explanation.

The teacher's reply—"I see, but maybe now is a good time to let him take more respon-

sibility” (line 6)—marks a gentle shift from empathy to prescription. The conjunction “*but*” serves as a pivot, shifting the conversation from understanding to advice. The suggestion to “let him take more responsibility” redefines the mother’s caring vigilance as potentially counterproductive to the child’s development. In this moment, the teacher serves as both counsellor and gatekeeper, validating the parent’s intentions while reasserting the institutional value of autonomy. The parent’s subsequent reformulation—“so you suggest I step back a little”—demonstrates both understanding and acceptance. Her wording displays sensitivity to the relational stakes of the advice: she recognises that stepping back does not mean withdrawal but a recalibration of care. The qualifier “a little” is interactionally significant, as it mitigates the proposed withdrawal of parental involvement. Rather than framing the shift as a radical disengagement, it presents it as a calibrated adjustment that preserves the parent’s identity as caring while aligning with institutional expectations to foster autonomy. This small linguistic device thus embodies the delicate balance between involvement and restraint that characterises “good parenting” in this context.

The teacher’s final affirmation, “exactly, so that he develops autonomy before next year” (line 8), completes the transformation of the issue into a developmental narrative. This sequence encapsulates both the emotional and moral complexity of contemporary parenting within educational contexts and the broader institutional double bind to which parents are subjected (Formenti, 2012; Dalledonne Vandini & Cino 2023). The mother’s stance reveals the tension between two intertwined imperatives: protecting the child from failure and preparing him for independence. Her fear that the child might “go to school without things” speaks to the moral pressure placed on parents to prevent error, to smooth the child’s path through institutional expectations. However, the teacher’s advice reframes this protective stance as an obstacle to growth. Autonomy is presented not as an innate quality but as something that can only emerge through the parent’s deliberate withdrawal. Such moments illuminate how educational transitions function as moral negotiations between competing logics of care. On one side, parental care is defined through

doing for—anticipating needs, preventing mistakes, demonstrating love through active support. On the other hand, institutional care is defined by *allowing to do alone*—granting space for self-management, resilience, and responsibility. These orientations are not oppositional but coexist in delicate balance. The teacher’s recommendation to “step back a little” signals the fine-tuning expectation of “good parenting:” the ability to calibrate involvement according to developmental norms endorsed by the school. The conversation also highlights how autonomy is treated as both an individual and relational achievement. The child’s independence is not simply a personal attribute but the outcome of coordinated adjustments by parents and teachers. The mother must learn to *let go*, the teacher must encourage without over-directing, and the child must internalise the norm of self-responsibility. In this sense, autonomy is distributed across the interactional network that surrounds the child. It is an ongoing negotiation, not a fixed developmental endpoint.

5 Discussion

The analysis of parent-teacher conferences during the transition from primary to secondary school reveals that these encounters are more than simple information exchanges; they are interactional events in which identities, responsibilities, and developmental goals are negotiated in highly consequential ways. By focusing on the micro-details of talk, we have observed how parents and teachers collaboratively construct readiness as an interactionally achieved category for secondary school and situate themselves in relation to this institutional project. Across the excerpts, readiness emerges as a central organising category through which children’s present behaviours are evaluated and projected into future expectations. Rather than being treated as an objective condition, readiness is interactionally constructed as a moral and institutional benchmark that structures both assessment and advice. A central insight of the data presented here is that developmental goals such as independence, maturity, and organisational skills are not neutral descriptors but socially charged categories. They operate as evaluative lenses through which children’s

present behaviours are projected into an imagined future. When a teacher remarks that a child “still needs to become more independent,” the utterance not only assesses the child but also assigns responsibility: parents are implicitly called upon to create the conditions for independence, while teachers position themselves as diagnosticians of progress and custodians of institutional norms. In this sense, developmental goals serve as boundary markers between the roles of parent and teacher, clarifying what constitutes effective support while also delineating potential overreach. The negotiation of these boundaries is rarely straightforward. Parents, keen to present themselves as caring and responsible, often produce accounts of their own efforts—descriptions of routines at home, examples of children’s achievements outside school, or assurances that they are encouraging autonomy. Teachers, while acknowledging these contributions, sometimes reframe them by cautioning against “too much help” or by stressing that secondary school requires greater self-reliance. This dynamic illustrates the paradox at the heart of contemporary parenting: parents must demonstrate involvement but also restraint. The “good parent” is neither absent nor overly present, but is finely attuned to the school’s institutional expectations.

Teachers, too, negotiate their professional identity in these interactions. They must balance their institutional role as evaluators with their relational role as partners in the child’s development (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992). To do so, they often employ strategies that soften criticism-hedging remarks, embedding critique within compliments, or framing observations as future-oriented guidance rather than present failures. These practices not only protect parents’ face but also enable teachers to maintain authority without jeopardising rapport. The identity of the “good teacher” is thus constructed in the dual ability to diagnose challenges with clarity while sustaining a collaborative relationship with families. What emerges, then, is a picture of the transition as a joint project, in which responsibility is distributed and renegotiated through talk. Parents and teachers together produce a trajectory that extends beyond the present moment, constructing the child’s fu-

ture self as a more independent, mature, and organised student. This discursive work is not merely descriptive but performative: by talking about readiness, adults actively shape what readiness means and how it should be achieved.

Across the excerpts, a set of recurrent interactional patterns becomes evident, revealing how parents and teachers jointly construct meaning around the child’s transition to secondary school. A striking feature of these exchanges is their future-oriented framing: teachers rarely speak of children’s current behaviours in isolation, but rather project them into the imagined landscape of secondary education, where greater independence, discipline, and academic rigour will be expected. This projection transforms the present moment into a preparatory stage and gives moral weight to the idea of readiness (Pillet-Shore, 2016). Parents, in turn, tend to respond with accounts and justifications that demonstrate care and responsibility. Their contributions—stories about routines, activities, or efforts at home—function to protect both the child’s image and their own identity as attentive caregivers (Pillet-Shore, 2012). These responses rarely challenge the teacher’s authority; instead, they display alignment and a shared orientation to the institutional goal of fostering development. Teachers often manage the delicacy of evaluation through what could be described as *compliment–criticism sandwiches*, embedding critique within praise to preserve rapport and mitigate face threats. In these moments, professional authority is exercised through tact rather than confrontation. Parents commonly pick up on these cues, reformulating and ratifying the teacher’s advice in their own words, thereby demonstrating understanding and commitment to collaboration. Taken together, these practices give rise to what might be called shared developmental projects: the redefinition of difficulties not as individual failures but as collective responsibilities distributed between home and school. Through this collaborative framing, parents and teachers transform the child’s progress into a joint moral enterprise, reaffirming both professional and familial identities while sustaining the institutional narrative of continuous growth and preparation.

These findings resonate with broader discussions about education and neoliberalism. The emphasis on independence and self-management reflects cultural logics that prioritise individual responsibility and preparedness for the “future world”. Parent-teacher conferences become local enactments of these logics, where the abstract ideals of policy and pedagogy are translated into everyday advice and evaluations. In this sense, the conferences can be seen as institutional rituals that reproduce societal expectations about what constitutes a “successful student”, a “competent parent”, and a “professional teacher”. The data analysed underscore that transitions to secondary school are co-constructed processes, deeply embedded in interactional practices. They involve the mobilisation of developmental goals, the negotiation of parental and teacher identities, and the distribution of responsibility across institutional and familial domains. By understanding these practices, we not only gain insight into how transitions are accomplished but also into the broader cultural frameworks that shape contemporary education.

6 Conclusion

This study has sought to show how parents and teachers negotiate the delicate passage from primary to secondary school through the micro-analysis of talk in parent-teacher conferences. By employing Conversation Analysis, the research has treated transitions not as external events or structural shifts but as processes carried out moment by moment in interaction. What emerges from the analysis is the striking extent to which the future looms in the present: teachers repeatedly frame children’s current behaviours with reference to what will be demanded “once in secondary school,” thereby transforming the future into a normative horizon against which today’s performance is evaluated. In these conversations, the transition is not merely anticipated but actively shaped. Equally striking is the role of developmental goals—*independence, maturity, organisation, focus*—in structuring the discourse. These categories are invoked not only to evaluate children but also to position parents and teachers themselves. When

teachers describe a child as developing *independence*, they simultaneously validate the family’s practices; when they highlight a lack of independence, they implicitly call upon parents to take—or to refrain from taking—responsibility. Such goals function, then, as moral benchmarks. They are future-oriented, prescriptive, and deeply relational, enmeshed in wider discourses of preparedness and self-management that characterise contemporary schooling.

The parent-teacher conference thus becomes a site where responsibility is carefully negotiated. Parents display themselves as responsible by providing accounts of routines, extracurricular activities, or strategies used at home. Teachers, however, sometimes reframe these accounts by suggesting that too much parental control may hinder autonomy, thereby urging a recalibration of responsibility. What results is a paradoxical form of parenting: parents must be present but not intrusive, supportive yet restrained. Teachers, for their part, must maintain authority while also displaying empathy and sensitivity, often through conversational strategies such as hedging or the compliment-criticism “sandwich.” The identities of the “good parent” and “good teacher” emerge not as pre-given roles but as relational accomplishments, performed and ratified in the very act of negotiating the child’s development.

What Conversation Analysis allows us to see is the finely tuned interactional work through which these identities and responsibilities are managed. “Facework” is omnipresent (Goffman, 1959): teachers soften criticisms to preserve parental dignity, parents align with advice to acknowledge institutional expertise, and both parties collaborate to prevent conflict while sustaining the legitimacy of their respective roles. These practices may seem mundane, yet they reveal the institutional logic of schooling in action. The future orientation of conferences reflects a broader neoliberal discourse of preparation, in which education is conceived as an ongoing project of readiness for the next stage (Greenfield et al., 2000). Children must not only succeed in the present but also be continually shaped to meet the demands of the future. Parents and teachers jointly shoulder this responsibility, narrating the child’s progress as a trajectory

that extends beyond the immediate classroom¹. Although the present study is primarily concerned with the interactional organisation of parent–teacher conferences, the analysis may offer some tentative reflections for practice. In particular, the excerpts examined here show how expectations about autonomy and parental involvement are communicated indirectly and negotiated during the conferences.

The implications for practice are significant. If conferences are recognised not merely as opportunities to “inform” parents but as interactional spaces where identities and responsibilities are at stake, then teacher training should place greater emphasis on interactional competence. The ability to deliver assessments with sensitivity, to balance critique with encouragement, and to negotiate parental roles without alienation is no less a professional skill than subject expertise. Likewise, schools could support parents more explicitly by clarifying what forms of involvement are expected and valued at different stages, thereby reducing the ambiguity that often surrounds the definition of “good parenting.” Such efforts would also help to address inequalities, since parents with less cultural capital may find it harder to align with the implicit norms of conferences (Bove & Mantovani, 2015; Davitti, 2013). Seen in this light, the excerpts encapsulate a broader societal tension. Contemporary education systems valorise self-directed learners and autonomous individuals, yet these ideals are inseparable from complex networks of care, supervision, and accountability. The child who appears independent at school may be the product of intensive parental involvement at home.

1 While this study is situated in a particular educational context, the patterns resonate with findings in other cultural settings (Nguyen, Tangen, & Beutel, 2014) suggesting that the negotiation of readiness and responsibility is a widespread phenomenon. At the same time, the specific developmental goals valorized—independence, autonomy, organizational skills—reflect cultural values that may differ elsewhere. This points to the need for comparative research that examines how transitions are framed across diverse contexts, including those shaped by linguistic diversity, socioeconomic inequalities, or alternative educational philosophies.

The discourse of independence, therefore, obscures the collective labour that sustains it. This insight carries important implications for understanding the transition to secondary school. If independence is treated as the central criterion of readiness, then those children whose families cannot provide extensive scaffolding risk being judged as unprepared or lacking maturity (Horvat et al., 2003; Elbers & de Haan, 2014). The institutional valorisation of autonomy thus has a moral dimension: it rewards forms of parenting that align with middle-class ideals of self-regulation and penalises those that emphasise interdependence or collective responsibility. The apparently neutral discourse of independence is therefore deeply social, entangled with classed and cultural understandings of what it means to raise a competent child (Granata et al., 2015). The transition from primary to secondary school is far more than a bureaucratic shift or a developmental milestone. It is a moral and institutional project, accomplished through delicate negotiations between parents and teachers. In these conversations, the child’s readiness is evaluated, parental competence is displayed, professional authority is affirmed, and shared responsibility is crafted. To understand transitions, therefore, is to understand the interactional practices that sustain them. By turning our analytic gaze to these practices, we gain insight not only into the nature of schooling but also into the broader cultural logics of care, responsibility, and preparedness that shape contemporary childhood.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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