

Kids in Space : Social and Moral Positioning in Parent-teacher Interviews

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This paper analyses extracts from three parent-teacher interviews which took place at a state secondary school in Brisbane. Students, as well as parents and teachers, were present at these sessions. The analysis of such talk is of interest in that parent-teacher interviews are one of the educational sites in which the institutional identities of parents, teachers and students are assembled and talked into being. Participants are seen to be mutually positioning each other during these sequences in which they offer moral accounts and versions of home and school for each other. This paper proceeds from an earlier paper (Baker and Keogh, 1992) which discussed how topics of talk are assembled by participants, mainly at the beginning of parent-teacher interviews.

This paper focuses on extracts from interviews wherein space becomes topicalized. Of particular concern is where, and with whom the students (Donna, Barry and Christa) are sitting. Movement of students within classroom and/or outside (home) space is proposed as the possible solution to the problem of student achievement. Such work might be likened to a game of chess wherein the students are moved around hypothetically amongst an array of moral types (other students), like pieces in the game by the players (interview participants).

Both the classroom and outside (home) space are geographical spaces with definite boundaries. However, the boundaries shift, and at times the school is seen to colonise home space through this talk. During the interviews the participants are mutually

positioned as being morally accountable for practices within these spaces. In this way geographical and social space becomes moral space for fixing the problem of student achievement. Talk in the interview extracts position and reposition the students' bodies within different hypothetical spaces. The positioning of the body within social and moral space might be viewed as a means of surveillance (McHoul, 1989). Foucault (1977) has suggested that institutional discourses constitute a means of regulation and control. Talk within these parentteacher interviews demonstrate how the adult interview participants maintain their preferences interviews works in positioning students, I will consider four recurring features : the constitution of moral spaces inside and outside the classroom, the accountability for practices, the constitution of moral categorizations of student types, and the apparent alignment and student marginalisation within these extracts of parent-teacher

talk. For the purposes of this paper, all names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants. Fully informed consent of all participants was obtained before the project commenced.

Moral spaces inside and outside the classroom :

In the first segment of talk transcribed in full below, the problem of the student's achievement being linked to the girls with whom she is sitting is raised by the teacher within her first utterance. Already, within this initial extract, the student's position within the moral space of the classroom is marked out. It seems that there are different kinds of moral spaces, and different ways of using those spaces. :

Interview 1 : Segment 1 :

Interview Participants : Teacher :
Ellen
Student :
Donna
Parents :
Mother and Father

1 T

Okay all right we'll just forget it I should cover it up or something I hate tape recorders! hh right um Donna um I just took over Mister Jay's class um four weeks ago so, I don't really know alot about Donna's work I've had a quick look at her work in her folder, and from her marks she um, you seem to have, passed in the first part of the year and then really gone down in last two um, pieces of work which was a poetry oral? an a um a novel in another form that was putting part of the novel into another style of writing. Now um (2.0) in class (1.0) Donna's a little bit distracted? often? down the back there, with um the girls that she sits with, though she does give in class when she's asked to, she does all her work, um I'm (1.0) would you like to, do you work with Donna at home with her schoolwork at all? do you see it at all or?

2 F
Not really no =

3 M
=(We very rarely) see her homework

4 F
They generally disappear off to their bedrooms with their homework and um =

5 T
=Ye:s (2.0) well um

6 F
We don't see much of (it)

7 T
Let me see yes I didn't mark this this was all Mr Jay's ...

Similar to every case studied within a corpus of eleven parent-teacher interviews conducted at two Brisbane secondary schools (Keogh,1992), the academic achievement of the student (Donna in this instance) is "found" as the opening topic by the teacher (Ellen). The linking of Donna's having "... gone down in [the] last two ... pieces of work ...", namely a poetry oral and putting part of a novel into another form, with her often being "... a little bit distracted ... down the back there, with ... the girls that she sits with ..." immediately constitutes classroom space as m

In this segment, Donna herself is again made responsible for her behaviour within this space.

Similarly, in the following extract :

Interview 1 : Segment 3 :f

- ` I mean this year, sitting down the back
- ` Oh yeah, I know =
- ` with these girls, yeah
- ` Because you're off, all over the place with these girls
- ` Yeah (0.5) so I I don't
- ` know, I think that depends on groups you know, Donna wants to sit down the front, or sit in another place because (1.0) really you and Nicky and Jo sit down the back and sort of chat to each other a little bit, don't you?
- ` Yeah
- ` Yeah, and that's where that industry and attitude comes from because (1.0) if you're too busy getting your work done or or participating in the class discussion (1.0) so. I don't know, it's really the three of you got to pull up your socks sort of thing or or you sit somewhere different, but (4.0)
- ` I think you should sit somewhere different

In this immediately preceding sequence of talk, the back of the classroom is constituted as being an improper place because of the behavioural practices of the group of students who have positioned themselves there @ that is, the designation of classroom space becomes shorthand for behavioural practices. In contrast, other classroom space (turn 89, when the teacher specifies "... down the front ... or ... in another place ...") is constituted as proper moral space. Such space is perhaps more accessible for direct teacher surveillance and control, thereby allowing the teacher's more efficient regulation of student behaviour.

In the other parent@teacher interviews, geographical classroom space is similarly constituted as being unacceptable moral space by means of association with unacceptable student behavioural practices, beyond the control of the teachers.

In the first segment of the parent@teacher interview involving Donna (Interview 1, Segment 1, transcribed earlier), not only is classroom space constituted as being morally accountable in

association with student practices and possible adult surveillance, but space beyond the classroom walls, in her home,

is similarly constructed. Towards the end of her first utterance, the teacher links Donna's work to home space, when Donna's parents are asked whether they supervise her schoolwork at all, thereby, perhaps, ascertaining whether home space is or is not morally acceptable social space. Both Donna's father and mother implicate themselves as possibly not being 'good' parents in that they state that they rarely see Donna's homework. Their home space might therefore have been perceived by the teacher to be an improper moral space. However, this possibility is pre-empted by Donna's parents suggesting that it wasn't the total home space that is possibly or possibly not morally acceptable, but, rather, the students' bedrooms, wherein "... they generally disappear ...", and are therefore, through such action, beyond the bounds of parental surveillance and accountability.

Accountability for practices :f

Moral space, both inside and outside the classroom, is constituted in parentTMteacher interview talk as not only being constructed by association with varying behavioural practices, but also by association with the possibility of adult surveillance. It is by positioning the students within moral space beyond the bounds of adult regulation through such institutional talk that parents and teachers are able to maintain morally accountable versions of themselves for each other.

Within the teacher's very first utterance, transcribed earlier, she constitutes herself as being possibly responsible and accountable for Donna's behaviour and achievement within classroom space. The possibility that Donna's parents may not be fully content with her (the teacher's) knowledge is pre-empted by the teacher's account regarding the brief period of time for which she has been responsible for Donna's work. By specifying her 'newness' ("... um I just took over Mister Jay's class um four weeks ago so, I don't really know alot about Donna's work accounted for. Furthermore, the teacher proceeds to present her version of herself as a 'good teacher' when she continues "... I've had a quick look at her work in her folder ...". From this talk it seems that the teacher holds herself responsible for knowing about her students' work within the space of the classroom, and positions Donna's parents as expecting her to know about this.

The teacher in this interview positions Donna's parents as being responsible for knowing about their daughter's work and work practices in space outside the classroom (home space). As

previously discussed, Donna's parents appear to accept this responsibility, but deflect accountability for Donna's practices by positioning her as being beyond the bounds of their surveillance, in bedroom space.

It seems, from evidence in talk transcribed from this and a number of other parent™teacher interviews, that parents hold teachers accountable for student behaviour in classroom space, and that teachers hold parents as being accountable for their children's behaviour in space beyond the classroom. Moreover, these expectations and positionings through parent@teacher interview talk seem to be accepted by the adult participants. However, in order that their integrity as parents and teachers is maintained within such talk, responsibility for possibly unacceptable practices is deflected, often by positioning the students themselves as being responsible for their behaviour.

Within parent@teacher interview talk students may be located beyond the bounds of adult supervision (at the back of the classroom, or in their bedrooms) in order to account for poor

achievement. Suggestions are directed to students regarding the necessity of repositioning themselves, or being repositioned, into more acceptable moral and social space, in order to improve their achievement. This is evidenced in Donna's parent@teacher interview (Interview 1, Segment 3), when her father, in turn 92, says "... I think you should sit somewhere else..." (as earlier cited). Similarly, in another parent@teacher interview with Barry and his mother (Interview 2, Segment 1, transcribed below), the mother directs the teacher to reposition Barry with different students (turn 133 : "... always sit him next to a boy..."), positioning the teacher as being responsible for this movement of her son in classroom space. The teacher accepts her responsibility, but later states (in turn 154) that her controlling strategies have already solved the problem of Barry's classroom behaviour, maintaining her version of herself as being a morally accountable teacher, as evidenced in the following talk extract :

Interview 2 : Segment 1 :

Interview participants : Teacher : Rosemary
Student : Barry
Parent : Mother

- ` ...he likes being with girls so
- ` yes yes of course

- ˘ It's very hard to break a habit which you (1.0) which you (
- ˘ Oh yes well I don't I don't think that there's er that there's anything wrong with that but I do think that there's something wrong with um having yeah cracking jokes or (1.0) um you know being half smart and all that sort of thing (2.0)
- ˘ Mm (1.0) that's that's in both classes english and cit ed
- ˘ No actually cit ed is quite good (2.0) but I th' this was this was only just a tiny aberration a couple of weeks ago wasn't it Barry (2.0) you've mended your ways under threat of detention

Moral categorisations of student types :f

The problem of with whom students should work in order to achieve better results, as evidenced above, is a frequently recurring feature of parent@teacher interview talk. The necessity of positioning themselves with the 'right group' is constituted as an appropriate solution to the problem of student achievement. Students are displayed as an array of moral types within interview talk, constituted as being 'proper' or 'improper' according both to their geographical location within classroom space (at the front or the back of the room), or in relation to their behavioural practices.

In both Donna's and Barry's parent@teacher interviews, as demonstrated earlier, the adult participants reposition the students in proximity with other student types who will possibly solve the problem of achievement. Within Christa's parent@teacher interview, however, transcribed below, it is the student herself who suggests her repositioning :

Interview 3 : Segment 1 :

Interview participants : Teacher : Ellen
Student : Christa
Parent : Mother

- ˘ I have to get into a different group of people () maybe
- ˘ Maybe yes
- ˘ Why not? Is there someoneelse you like?
- ˘ What about some of those
- ˘ other girls you did the radio play with? them

- ˘ No hh
- ˘ Yeah, 'cos that really affects you too, if they've got no enthusiasm and you do all the work again, you've had all the ideas you're exhausted you've run out of steam when it comes to performing. Is there anyone else that you get on with in that class?
- ˘ Daniel? hh
- ˘ Well at least Daniel's got a little bit of get up and go he may act all right
- ˘ yeah, he'll do stuff =
- ˘ Yeah
- ˘ and, um like, um Jodie and Michelle and Karen they're all sort of fairly rough but (1.0) at least they do things
- ˘ Yeah where's that (card) oh here it is
- ˘ Is that Michelle Mitchell?
- ˘ No Michelle Armstrong and Karen and Jodie, they're sort of they're
- ˘ sort of rough but they're
- ˘ Ye:ah yeah look, Clarissa's got two and a half for her last oral
- ˘ Wow
- ˘ and um, so you need, to yeah get someone who's going to be a bit
- ˘ more
- ˘ Yeah
- ˘ Yeah those sort of people will hold you back

Here it is the student rather than an adult who raises the possibility of repositioning herself in classroom space, with other students. She thereby seems to assume responsibility for her own movements and provide her own solution to the problem of with whom to sit. However, as will be seen, this proposed repositioning is, in effect, not compliance on the part of Christa, but rather a provocation. Christa proposes a number of

'other' student possibilities with whom to sit, none of whom, it's ascertained during the talk, are actually found to be suitable moral types, and all of whom become rejected within this talk as solutions to this problem. By raising the possibility of her own repositioning, Christa retains responsibility and control for her movements, and also a space within the talk.

The teacher and Christa construct possibilities together. An array of moral types of students are constituted within this talk. Moral categorisations of acceptable versus unacceptable student types are cooperatively constructed by the participants, including the mother at the end of this sequence (turn 163). In response to Christa's suggestion that she should perhaps get into a different group, the choice of with whom to sit is allocated to Christa by the teacher, when the teacher asks in turn 147 whether there is anyone else that Christa likes. Mother's suggestion regarding "... some of those other girls you did the radio play with ..." is rejected by Christa, and the teacher confirms that this is a sensible decision when she offers a description of those particular girls @ "... they've got no enthusiasm ...". The constructed 'natural' result of associating with such immoral types is that Christa would have to do all the work, thereby becoming "exhausted" and "running out of steam when it comes to performing..." (turn 150).

An alternative student, Daniel, is then proposed by Christa, with which the teacher initially concurs, although the use of "maybe" here perhaps indicates a certain reluctance to fully endorse him as a choice. It seems the willingness to "do stuff" is part of being a morally acceptable student type, and Jodie, Michelle and Karen, as specified by Christa in her next turn, are added to the list of 'good' students, even though they are "... all sort of fairly rough..." in the third person, almost as though they were not present within the interview situation. At times, even when addressed directly, (as happens, for example, in Interview 2, Segment 2, transcribed below), Barry's mother actually jams the teacher's talk to Barry. She does this by directly intervening, seemingly in support of the teacher, but in effect retains space for her own talk, successfully silencing her son. Indeed, in turn 133 she cuts across the teacher's talk to Barry with a complete topic change, thereby silencing not only her son, but actively becoming the interview participant setting a new topic agenda, in competition with the teacher :

Interview 2 : Segment 2 :

128 ...writing is a practice, it's not it's not a um
(1.0) well you know people don't usually write as geniuses by

birth by birthright

129 ` Yeah

130 ` But it's a practice

131 ` It's continuous mm

132 ` Yeah and um it's something you've really gotta keep at
you become better at particularly with grammar I think that's

133 ` What about his behaviour is that alright

So it is that, although the participants within parent@teacher interviews often appear superficially in harmony, and compliant, at times strategies such as those explored above demonstrate the subtle tensions and competitions between the rules and realities of home life and of school life.

Conclusion :f

This paper has examined four features of talk in parent@teacher interviews audio™recorded in a secondary school in Brisbane,

which position the participants in various social and moral spaces. It seems that finding the 'right' moral space with the 'right' group of students in order to solve the problem of student achievement becomes topicalised in some institutional parent@teacher talk. Various strategies are used by participants in these interviews in order to negotiate a solution to this problem. These strategies work to position the participants both within the interview situation, and within hypothetical school and home space. Geographical space becomes moral space, and the students are moved around amongst an array of moral types (other students) like pieces in a game of chess by the interview participants. Accountability for moral practices within different spaces is mutually constructed by the interview participants, and students are ultimately positioned as being responsible for their behaviour. In this way teachers' and parents' moral accounts of their practices remain intact. Such recurring features as the ones discussed above support Foucault's notion (cited in Luke, 1993) of the normalising and regulatory power of institutional discourse. Indeed, interview talk may be conceptualised as a technique for the categorisation and surveillance of the populace.

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