

Parent-teacher conferences in Dutch culturally diverse schools:

Participation and conflict in institutional context

Ed Elbers

(corresponding author)

Utrecht University, Department of Education

Heidelberglaan 1, 3584 CS Utrecht, the Netherlands

[E.Elbers@uu.nl](mailto:E.Elbers@uu.nl)

Telephone: +31 30 2533010 or +31 30 2534601

and

Mariëtte de Haan

Utrecht University, Department of Education

Heidelberglaan 1, 3584 CS Utrecht, the Netherlands

[M.deHaan@uu.nl](mailto:M.deHaan@uu.nl)

Telephone: +31 30 2537735 or +31 30 2534601

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9 1. Introduction  
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11 This study adds to the growing research on the involvement of parents with a migration  
12 background in schools (Crozier & Reay, 2005; Dantas & Manyak, 2010; Kim, 2009; Levine-  
13 Rasky, 2009). We analyse conferences between teachers and parents in culturally diverse  
14 schools in the Netherlands at a decisive moment in the pupils' school career. At the end of  
15 primary education, parents and teachers engage in a series of talks, in which they discuss the  
16 child's transition to secondary education. These conferences have a formal character, because  
17 the teacher gives an official recommendation, the "school advice". They are a source of  
18 concern and sometimes conflict, in particular when the teacher's advice is for a lower track of  
19 secondary education than the parents had imagined or expected.  
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Contacts between school and home about children from families with a migration background have been reported to be difficult because of parents' putative or real lack of knowledge of the school and the conventions of the educational system. Research on teachers' views on ethnic minority parents' involvement in schools shows that teachers often find these parents less involved than they think they should be and less involved than native parents. In these cases, they regard the poor participation as showing a lack of interest (Kim, 2009; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008). Other studies reveal that ethnic minority parents find the school difficult to approach and think that their view on their child is not taken seriously (Archer & Francis, 2007; Crozier, 2005; Huss-Keeler, 1997).

1.1. Context of the study

Our research concerns a particular type of institutional talk at the end of primary school in the Netherlands, when children are twelve years of age, and when they are about to leave primary school and proceed to secondary school. The primary school and the secondary school are two separate systems in the Netherlands. The transition from the one to the other entails a series of institutional activities and talks. Secondary education in the Netherlands consists of a tracked system, too complicated to explain here in detail, but with globally three levels: a level of general education as a preparation for university, a level of general education as a basis for professional education, and a level of vocational education with a more general and a more practical path. Children and their parents are not free to choose any one of these levels; they have to apply for admission to a secondary school that may offer one or more of the secondary tracks. In deciding about admission, a secondary school considers two pieces of information: the child's score on the National Test (the CITO test), and the advice of the teacher of the primary school the child is leaving.

1 Halfway through the last year at primary school, in the eighth grade of the Dutch  
2 system of primary education (children are twelve years of age), children do the CITO test.  
3 The CITO test examines math, reading and study skills, and expresses the child's performance  
4 in a general score. The CITO score and the teacher's advice are made known to the parents in  
5 a series of formal talks: in the first talk the CITO score and the provisional school advice are  
6 divulged. In a second talk, the final advice is presented and written down on a form which the  
7 school sends to the secondary school of the child's choice. This form includes a series of  
8 questions about the intellectual and social-emotional characteristics of the child. The current  
9 study deals with the second talks. The teacher's advice and their characterization of the pupil  
10 on the form are to a certain extent negotiable. The talks are therefore considered extremely  
11 important by parents; they know that the teacher is the gate keeper to secondary education for  
12 their child.  
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16 On average, children from migrant families achieve less well than native Dutch  
17 children on the CITO test (Herweijer, 2009). Children of the four main ethnic minority groups  
18 in the Netherlands (Moroccan, Turkish, Surinamese and Antillean), compared to native Dutch  
19 children, receive more often an advice for the vocational track. For example, in Amsterdam in  
20 2006 65% of children from the four minorities were referred to the lowest track in contrast to  
21 27% of native Dutch children (Babeliowsky & Den Boer, 2007). Many migrant parents see  
22 education as a main vehicle for social success for their children, and they are sometimes  
23 disappointed when they hear the advice; moreover, they differ more often with teachers about  
24 the advice than native Dutch parents (Jol & Traag, 2001; Driessen et al., 2005). Teachers find  
25 this difficult to deal with. They ascribe these parents' disappointment to unrealistic aspirations  
26 for their children and insufficient knowledge of the Dutch educational system (Driessen et al.,  
27 2005).  
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## 34 1.2. Theories of intercultural disagreement 35

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37 For explaining misunderstandings and conflicts between teachers and migrant parents, some  
38 authors have applied an approach based on a cultural difference theory. The assumption of  
39 this theory is that, in encounters of people with different cultural backgrounds,  
40 misunderstandings and dissimilar interpretations easily occur because of differences in  
41 cultural expectations and knowledge. Sometimes, these differences are considered to be  
42 connected with broad cultural orientations, often expressed as dichotomies, such as  
43 collectivism/individualism. One example of this type of research is a study by Greenfield,  
44 Quiroz & Raeff (2000) of 9 parent-teacher conferences at a primary school in the US,  
45 involving Latino immigrant parents. Greenfield et al. interpret the conflicts in these  
46 conferences as having to do with parents' and teachers' disagreement of developmental goals,  
47 which the authors link to the collectivist culture of the parents and the individualistic culture  
48 of the teachers.  
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51 A cultural difference approach has been criticized because it easily leads to a  
52 deterministic perspective that sees culture as static and unchangeable (de Haan & Elbers,  
53 2005; Elbers, 2010). It brings the risk of ignoring the complexity and contextual variation in  
54 people's reactions. Pointing out the agency of the participants in dialogues, we earlier have  
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1 defended a cultural production perspective (de Haan & Elbers, 2005) and stressed the  
2 dialogical and transformative nature of cultural diversity (de Haan, Elbers & Wissink, 2012,  
3 see also Avruch, 2003; Mannheim & Tedlock, 1995). Building on this earlier work we see  
4 culture as dynamic, and as continuously being reshaped in interactions and confrontations  
5 between members of social groups. Participants produce diversity locally, borrowing from  
6 cultural orientations that exist 'outside' the dialogue, but also transforming these orientations  
7 while reacting to the demands and actions within a dialogue. An example of such a  
8 perspective is a study by Davidson (1996), who, in her analysis of classroom cultures in  
9 schools, argues that the academic identities students bring into the classroom are reworked in  
10 processes of collusion and conflict as students react to the institutional context.  
11 Interactions in institutional settings are asymmetrical: the interlocutors have different roles  
12 and power; they possess unequal access to resources and information (Drew & Heritage,  
13 1992a; Dahlstedt, 2009). Studies of interaction between professionals and lay people, such as  
14 between doctor and patient or between social worker and client, illustrate that the partners in  
15 the talks have unequal rights to introduce and change topics and to make decisions (Drew &  
16 Heritage, 1992b; Lunneblad & Johansson, 2012). The procedure for the Dutch teacher-parent  
17 conferences places the parents in a subordinate position: the rules and conditions have been  
18 prescribed by the school. Conflicts, therefore, have also to be seen in the context of the roles  
19 and power differences in the institutional context (Kakavá, 2001; Levinson, 1992).

26 In line with the Communication Accommodation Theory (Jones et al, 1999), we depart  
27 from the idea that participants in a conversation who consider each other as different need to  
28 establish common ground. However, contrary to the idea that cultural differences influence  
29 the conversation from the outside, as some studies in this tradition assume, we suggest that  
30 difference is thematized or, alternatively, purposively neglected by the interlocutors. The  
31 partners in a conversation use interactional strategies to move closer to each other, or to do the  
32 reverse and emphasize interpersonal or cultural differences (de Haan & Wissink, 2013) .  
33 Strategies refer to the ways speakers design their contributions to a conversation, aimed at  
34 convincing the other to accept a belief or point of view (Johnstone, 2007). We see the teacher-  
35 parent talks as occurring in an arena in which participants are confronted with institutional  
36 demands and goals, and have to reconsider or re-profile the meanings they bring into the  
37 institution.  
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### 43 44 1.3.The study

47 Our goal in presenting this study is to analyse the relationships between language,  
48 institutional situation and cultural identity in the conferences. We present a discourse analysis  
49 of 33 teacher-parent conferences at two Dutch culturally diverse primary schools. We aim in  
50 particular at the way disagreements in the conferences are constructed and handled. Firstly,  
51 we adopt a descriptive perspective by looking at the extent to which parents with a migration  
52 background participated in the same manner as native Dutch parents and whether they could  
53 express their point of view successfully. How do parents with a migration background  
54 participate in the conferences? That is: to what extent can they contribute to the conferences  
55 and, by introducing their point of view and knowledge of their child, influence the decision  
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1 making? Do conflicts and disagreements occur more often in the conferences with migrant  
2 parents than with native Dutch parents? How are disagreements resolved? Are disagreements  
3 resolved differently in conferences with migrant parents in comparison with conferences with  
4 native Dutch parents? Secondly, we will ask: how can these disagreements be explained and  
5 interpreted? In particular, we will look at the conflicts from an agency perspective and try to  
6 understand how the participants construct and handle the conflicts.  
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## 8 9 10 2. Corpus and analytic approach

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12 We audio recorded 33 parent-teacher conferences at two primary schools: 15 conferences at  
13 The Anchor and 18 conferences in The Buoy. The schools are multi-ethnic schools in Utrecht,  
14 the Netherlands. Parents at these schools were informed about the goals of the research in a  
15 letter. At the beginning of the conferences, the teacher introduced the researcher and ensured  
16 that the parents did not object to the recording of the conversation. Most parents (87%) gave  
17 permission. If the parents agreed to participate, the audio recorder was switched on and the  
18 researcher took a seat in an inconspicuous place of the room (De Haan & Wissink, 2013).  
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21 The observations at The Anchor concern 11 native Dutch children and four children  
22 from migrant families. The conferences in The Buoy are about 15 children from migrant  
23 families and three native Dutch children. The children from families with a migration  
24 background were mostly second generation migrants; their parents were born outside the  
25 Netherlands, but they were born themselves in the Netherlands (De Haan & Wissink, 2013).  
26 In the conferences in the Buoy, the pupils themselves were present, accompanied by one or  
27 both parents, and in one case by the mother and an aunt. The policy of the Anchor was to  
28 invite only the parents. The conferences at The Anchor took between 5 min 44 s and 47 min  
29 44 s with a mean of 17 min 20 s; the conferences at The Buoy between 1 min 6 s and 18 min 6  
30 s, with a mean of 9 min 3 s. A few of the conferences at The Buoy were short, because the  
31 teacher and parents had discussed the child's achievements and capacities in a previous  
32 meeting and, therefore, could take a decision within several minutes.  
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35 The conferences in the two schools consisted of two phases corresponding with two  
36 parts of a form that had to be completed. First, the teacher presented the result of the CITO  
37 test and the teacher's advice for one of the levels of secondary education. The advice was  
38 compared with the school type and level the parents had in mind. If there were differences  
39 about the advice, a discussion followed in which the teacher tried to align her advice with the  
40 parents' view. The teacher also asked the parents which particular school the child would like  
41 to enrol. Next, the teacher introduced a list of questions on cognitive and social-emotional  
42 aspects of the child, as well as particular facts that might be important for the new school to  
43 know. Examples of these questions are: will the child need any special form of supervision?  
44 Have there been any problems with the social-emotional development of the child? Are there  
45 any physical particularities? The school teacher wrote down the answers to these questions. In  
46 case of disagreement with the teacher, there was place on the form for the parents' own  
47 comments. The completed form, signed by teacher and parents, was to be sent to the preferred  
48 school, which, in a later stage, would notify the parents of its decision about acceptance of the  
49 child.  
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1 We transcribed the recordings. The analysis consisted of three steps. As a first step, we  
2 singled out the conferences in which the partners had to solve a disagreement. All transcripts  
3 were classified independently by two raters as ‘conferences with disagreements’ or  
4 ‘conferences with mainly agreement’. The disagreements that we found referred to conflicts  
5 about the advice, disputes about disciplining or the child’s character and situations in which  
6 the parents questioned the quality of the teachers or the school. The correspondence between  
7 the raters was 88%. The raters discussed and reached agreement on the cases they initially  
8 differed about. This procedure led to 14 conferences with disagreement.  
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10 Theorists of conflict have studied how confrontation is resolved in institutional  
11 contexts and found three ways in which conflicts are settled: (1) when there are mutual  
12 concessions on both partners’ sides (compromise), (2) when there is an unilateral concession  
13 because one participant has to give up part of his demands (concession), and (3) when one  
14 participant, because of their more powerful position, makes a final decision, whereas the other  
15 partner has no other way than to accept it (submission) (Gunthner, 2000; Ting-Toomey &  
16 Takai, 2006; Van Meurs & Spencer-Oatey, 2007). By way of a second step we classified the  
17 talks with disagreement using the three categories of conflict resolution, presented above:  
18 compromise, concession and submission. Using these categories allowed us to study if the  
19 conflict resolution in the conferences led to compromises to which both teachers and parents  
20 contributed, or rather to what extent the talks resulted in the parents accepting the teachers’  
21 view, to which they had to concede or submit. This classification procedure resulted in an  
22 interrater correspondence of 12 out of 14 (86%). The raters discussed the two transcripts on  
23 which they disagreed until they agreed about their classification.  
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25 The third step was a discourse analysis on the transcripts, with an emphasis on the  
26 conferences with disagreement. Conflict talk is characterized by negotiation of referential,  
27 social and expressive meanings (Kakavá, 2001). People engaging in conflicts may use the  
28 discursive device of recontextualization: they produce alternative representations of the social  
29 world in order to challenge and invalidate their partners’ claims and to seek to convince their  
30 partners that they are wrong (Jacquemet, 1999; Leung, 2002). Recontextualizations as part of  
31 conflict talk particularly tend to bear on (1) systems of belief and (2) social relationships  
32 (Jacquemet, 1999; Fairclough, 1992; Kakavá, 2001). In particular, we marked the parts of  
33 the conversations in which parents used recontextualization of beliefs as a means to present  
34 counter-arguments and also how parents provided alternative accounts of the relationship with  
35 the teachers as a recontextualization strategy. Since many parents with a migration history do  
36 not speak the Dutch language fluently, we were also interested in bringing to light what  
37 communicative difficulties occurred because of language problems in the conferences (cf.  
38 Scollon & Scollon, 2001).  
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### 51 3. Results

#### 52 3.1. Conflicts in the talks

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55 There were 14 conferences in which a disagreement was observed, concerning 11 migrant  
56 children and three native Dutch children. The remaining 19 conferences were classified as  
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1 talks with mainly agreement; they involved eight children from migrant families and 11  
2 children from native Dutch families. There were more disagreements in the conference with  
3 migrant parents than with native Dutch parents ( $\chi^2 = 4.388$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.036$ ).

4 The schools did not differ in the number of selected situations of disagreement ( $\chi^2 =$   
5  $0.93$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.335$ ). Understandably, the talks with disagreement took more time than the  
6 conferences without disagreements (mean conferences with disagreement: 16 min 25 s; mean  
7 conferences with agreement: 10 min 28 s; Wilcoxon rank sum test,  $W=268$ ,  $p=.047$ ).

8 In the conferences with agreement the teachers and parents found out that their  
9 opinions about the track and school concurred. Here, there was no difficulty to solve, because  
10 the parents and teachers agreed about the advice. In some conferences parents and teachers  
11 initially expressed different ideas, but they agreed later on without conflicts or objections. At  
12 The Buoy, the teacher advised an additional test for some children; in these cases, the decision  
13 about the school advice was postponed to a later meeting.

14 In the conferences with disagreements, the participants had to find a solution. After all,  
15 the form had to be signed by the teacher and the parents before it could be sent to the  
16 secondary school. The classification of the conferences according to the conflict resolution  
17 types resulted in the division of Table 1.

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TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

### 3.2. Conflict resolution types

#### 3.2.1. Procedural compromise

The parents and teachers in the conferences that were assigned to this category did not give up their differing opinions, but they used the options provided for in the procedure to eventually find a compromise.

The conferences involving the parents of Lisa and Onur concerned differences about the level considered appropriate for the child. The teachers, referring to the results of the CITO test, wanted to give a lower advice than the parents would have liked. The parents skilfully referred to past performances of their children and mentioned circumstances in their child's life that might explain a temporary decrease in their performances. In Lisa's case the teachers proposed that the advice be postponed until the child had done an additional intelligence test. This compromise was applauded by the parents. As for Onur, the parents convinced the teacher to give a more favourable advice, which amounted to a recommendation to enrol him in a mixed-level classroom which some schools offer, and which implies that the choice for a track in secondary school is postponed until the end of the first year at secondary school.

The differences between the teacher and the parents of Bram and, again, Onur concerned the psychological qualification of the children that the teacher intended to write on the form. In Bram's case, the teacher wanted to refer to Bart as a solitary boy. In Onur's case, the teacher considered the boy's lack of concentration a risk for his secondary school career. In the two conferences, the parents extensively discussed these qualifications with the

1 teachers, agreeing in some respects, but disagreeing with others. They tried to convince the  
2 teachers to refrain from mentioning these qualifications, because they feared that the new  
3 school would label the child in a way that would not give them a fair chance to be successful.  
4 In the end, a compromise was reached in that the parents would use the space for parents on  
5 the form to write down their comments on the teacher's qualification. The disagreement over  
6 Julia concerned the school choice rather than the track considered appropriate. The teacher  
7 and parents eventually agreed to mention on the form that they had different opinions as to the  
8 school that would suit Julia best.  
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10 In all cases, the parents had not only consented to the compromise, but contributed to  
11 it and, during the talk, made suggestions for finding a way out of the disagreement. It is  
12 interesting that Onur's parents are the only migrant parents with a high educational level.  
13 They have an excellent command of Dutch and made clear to the teacher that they identify  
14 with Dutch society. They also insisted that their boy is presented on the form as a Dutch child,  
15 whereas the teacher had initially mentioned Onur as Turkish.  
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### 21 3.2.2. Concession

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23 In three conferences at the Buoy the parents tried to convince the teacher that it would be  
24 advantageous for their child to repeat the last year of primary school, instead of making the  
25 transition to secondary school at this stage. Their idea was that the children would be better  
26 prepared for secondary school and might have a higher score on the CITO test next year, so  
27 that their chances to be successful at secondary school would increase. The parents have a  
28 Moroccan background (parents of Ferit, Fouzia and Omar). It has occurred before at the Buoy  
29 that pupils repeat the eighth grade and the teachers, when the parents raised the possibility,  
30 answered that this option is open for discussion. However, in each case the teachers agreed  
31 only conditionally.  
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36 The teacher described Ferit and Omar to the parents as very difficult pupils in the  
37 classroom. She told the parents that their children would only be admitted to a further year at  
38 the primary school, if they promised to mend their ways and would show this by behaving  
39 very well in the coming period until the summer holidays. Contrary to their wish, the parents  
40 had to formally apply for a place for their sons at a secondary school and only if the boys  
41 would behave very well could their application be withdrawn at the last moment.  
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45 In the case of Fouzia, the parents had to concede to have their daughter examined by a  
46 psychologist for her seclusive behaviour, before the teacher agreed to accept Fouzia for a  
47 second year in her classroom. The mother accepted the examination, but made the impression  
48 not to understand why the teacher was so concerned about her daughter.  
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50 In the three cases, the parents had to face the teacher's critical (in the cases of Ferit  
51 and Omar) or concerned (in the case of Fouzia) attitudes towards the pupil. All parents  
52 opposed the description given by the teachers and said that they did not recognize their child  
53 characterized in these terms. The teachers, however, did not let themselves be convinced by  
54 the parents and did not alter their position. However, the critical issue in these talks was not  
55 the character of the child, but the parents' request to permit their child to double the last grade  
56 of primary school. The teachers agreed conditionally: only if Fouzia would be examined, and  
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1 only if the two boys would behave well in the remaining months before the end of the school  
2 year, would they consider having the children a second year in their class.

3 The parents had to agree, because that was the only way for them to see their wish for  
4 the child's future accepted. But they seemed to do so reluctantly. Neither did the parents  
5 contribute to finding a solution to the disagreement. Leaving the room, the parents had no  
6 guarantee that they would realize their plan, but they had not seen their plan rejected either.  
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### 9 3.2.3. Submission

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11 In the conferences in this category, there were divisions between the teacher and the parents  
12 which they did not succeed in bridging. The conferences on Ikram, Hanane, Nadhir, Fahd and  
13 Naoual concerned the children's disappointing scores on the CITO test and the teacher's  
14 advice for the lower track of secondary education. In Dennis's and Ismael's cases the  
15 discussion was on the boys' behaviour at school.  
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19 Ikram's parents refused to believe that their daughter had achieved so poorly on the  
20 CITO test. They rejected the score and the teacher's advice based on it. Hanane's test score  
21 was a disappointment for her parents. According to the teachers, the girl is a slow learner,  
22 who is easily distracted. The father (the mother hardly contributed) expressed his opinion that  
23 Hanane's poor performance was caused by her recent transition from another school. One of  
24 the teachers interrupted him and said that they were happy to believe him, but that this fact is  
25 irrelevant for the advice. Talking about the CITO results of Naoual, the mother told the  
26 teacher that her daughter does not feel at ease at the school and that she is afraid of the  
27 teacher. In her opinion, this could explain the low score of Naoual. In the conference about  
28 Nadhir, he himself was the main speaker. The boy expressed his wish to have a higher advice  
29 than the teachers wanted to give but the teachers told him and his mother that they could not  
30 possibly do that because of his low score on the test. He could have done much better, but the  
31 low scores show that he does not want to work for it. The disagreement about Fahd focused  
32 on the question what explains the poor results of the boy. The teacher thought that Fahd  
33 suffers from ADHD and that it is not to be expected that his results will improve. The father  
34 opposed this idea and thought that the results are caused by his son's laziness.  
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38 In the talks with the parents of Ismail and Dennis the conflict did not relate to the  
39 school advice, but rather to the behaviour of the pupils in school. In Ismail's case, the  
40 participants agreed about the advice. Dennis would receive his advice at a later stage, when he  
41 has done an additional intelligence test. The teachers took the opportunity to express their  
42 discontent with the behaviour of the boys. Ismael had addressed a girl in his class in a way  
43 which, according to the teachers, showed a lack of respect. Dennis is a regular latecomer and  
44 has been absent without permission lately. In the two conferences, the teachers made a  
45 connection to the transition to secondary school. If the boys would behave like this next year  
46 in their new school they would surely be sent away.  
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50 In the cases in this category, the parents' opinions and worries were overruled by the  
51 teacher. In the conferences on Dennis and Ismael, the teachers' opinions and descriptions of  
52 the child were the occasion for keen discussions among the teachers and the parents. The  
53 conference with the mother of Naoual ended in a complete breakdown of communication and  
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1 was adjourned to another time. None of the parents succeeded in persuading the teacher to  
2 soften their opinion or see the child in a more positive light. The parents had to submit to the  
3 teacher's advice and opinion of their child. Rather than contributing to a more favourable  
4 outcome of the talks, the parents set themselves squarely against the teachers and seemed not  
5 to be able to influence the talks in order to have a more favourable outcome.  
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### 7 8 3.3. Language in the conferences 9

10 Language difficulties were found both in the conferences with agreement and in the  
11 conferences with disagreement. In three conferences with agreement at the Buoy the  
12 conversation proceeded almost completely without contributions by the migrant parents. The  
13 teachers conducted the conversation with the child, who in one case acted as an interpreter for  
14 the parents. The parents, apart from greetings and exchanging civilities, did not participate. In  
15 these talks, the CITO test results and the school advice were uncontroversial; at least, neither  
16 the child nor the parents questioned the advice.  
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18 In many of the conferences with disagreement there were serious communication  
19 problems, because migrant parents' insufficient skills of the Dutch language impacted on their  
20 participation. In the talk concerning Fouzia, the mother brought with her the child's older  
21 sister, who did the talking, occasionally consulting her mother in Berber, although this girl  
22 was not very skilled in Dutch, either. As this was a talk where the teacher and the mother  
23 disagreed about the child's character and future, the language problems led to many  
24 complications. In the conference about Ismael, the mother brought along the child's aunt who  
25 acted as an interpreter. Ismael's mother, despite her poor competence in the language,  
26 contributed to the conversation with short statements in Dutch, but she left most of the talking  
27 to the aunt. In the talk at the Anchor on Ikram, serious differences of opinion arose between  
28 the teacher and the parents, who exerted themselves to make their opinion clear in Dutch  
29 despite their lacking competences in this language. In the conference about Nadhir, he himself  
30 was the main speaker. His mother contributed occasionally in short phrases of poor Dutch.  
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32 An aspect of language problems in the conferences is that teachers explained technical  
33 or difficult words, such as the names of tests or the tracks of secondary education. We found  
34 that the teachers clarified technical terms about the Dutch school system to many parents,  
35 independent of their background, but explained psychological terms only to migrant parents.  
36 These explanations related mainly to psychological terms, such as "fear of failure",  
37 "cognitive", "personality", "extravert", "self image". All the explanations of psychological  
38 terms but one occurred in conferences with migrant parents, and they were given by the  
39 teachers on their own initiative. There was one exception: in a conference with native Dutch  
40 parents, the term "sociability" was explained, and, here, the parents themselves contributed to  
41 the explanation.  
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43 In sum, participation of migrant parents was often hampered by their insufficient skills  
44 in Dutch. As the talks were held in the Dutch language, migrant parents were in a  
45 disadvantaged position. With the exception of Onur's parents they could not communicate on  
46 equal terms with the teacher. This may not have been a problem for parents who agreed with  
47 the school advice proposed by the teacher. In the conferences with disagreement, however,  
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1 the lack of knowledge of the Dutch language may have contributed to the conflicts and made  
2 compromises difficult.  
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#### 4 3.4. Conflict talk: questioning educational beliefs 5

6 Differences of educational beliefs were a main ingredient in the conflicts. The first theme is  
7 how to characterize the children's academic achievement and their behaviour at school, the  
8 second theme relates to the responsibility of the parent for the child's learning and behaviour  
9 at school.  
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11 As part of the procedure, teachers had to answer questions on the form about the  
12 physical and socio-emotional development of the pupil. Teachers told the parents what they  
13 intended to write on the form as an answer to these questions. Parents could react to the  
14 teacher's characterization of the pupil. The issue of the characterization of the pupil led to  
15 exchanges and conflicts in some conferences. We look first at the conferences with  
16 agreement: here we see that parents with a migrant background did not question the pupil's  
17 characterization. They expressed agreement with the teacher about the advice and, in some  
18 cases, additional testing of their child. As there was no discussion, the conferences without  
19 disagreement with migrant parents belong to the shortest in the corpus. However, native  
20 Dutch parents did often react to the teachers' opinion and elaborated on the teachers'  
21 characterization of their child. For instance, in the conference with Paul at The Anchor, the  
22 teacher said that the boy used to have a lack of self assurance, but has gained in this respect  
23 over the last year. The parents affirmed the teacher's impression and gave information about  
24 the family situation to explain their son's development. They also expressed their agreement  
25 with the teacher's concern about the pupil's bad handwriting and his lack of concentration.  
26

27 Only in conflict talks did migrant parents react to the teachers' characterization of the  
28 pupils. One example is the conference about Fouzia – a conference which is also an example  
29 of poor competence of Dutch on the parent's side. In the case of Fouzia, the teacher  
30 recommended a psychological examination of the child, who, she observed, secludes herself  
31 from the rest of the classroom when she is angry. The teacher expressed her concern about  
32 this behaviour and told the mother that she would prefer seeing Fouzia, as she formulated it,  
33 throwing books around than seeing her becoming a wall to others. The mother who was  
34 accompanied by another daughter, not by Fouzia herself, and who was dependent on the  
35 translations by Fouzia's sister, seemed to understand only part of what the teacher said. She  
36 reacted by telling that Fouzia is never angry at home. In the end, she had to give in, as the  
37 psychological examination was a condition by the teacher before she agreed to accept Fouzia  
38 for a second year in her classroom. The mother accepted, but probably not because she was  
39 convinced that the teacher's description of her daughter was right. She seemed not to accept  
40 the teacher's implied criticism of her daughter and brought forward her own experience to  
41 refute it.  
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43 In the case of Fahd the difference between the teacher and the boy's father had to do  
44 with the teacher's tendency to use psychological terms, whereas the parent tended to  
45 characterize his boy in behavioural terms (Excerpt 1).  
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Excerpt 1.

The Anchor. Talk between Teacher T and the Turkish father F of Fahd (boy, 12 years). They are completing a form for registering Fahd for a particular secondary school. Fahd is not present. Translation from the Dutch.

1. T: Physical development. Nothing wrong with that. Is completely all right. He has no, we do not have any diagnosed disturbance. We think, that he may have ADHD, but he was never examined for that. That means I cannot state that on the form.
2. F: I had a talk with, what is it called? With the... let me see. With the psychiatrist or, no, social worker.
3. T: Hmm.
4. (...)
5. F: I do not think he has ADHD.
6. T: Hmm.
7. F: I think he is too lazy with some things. He likes to have a nice meal
8. T: Yes
9. F: but he does not do much at home.
10. T: Yes, yes. At school I see things differently. I used to think that he took his work easy. But I saw that he changed very positively in this respect. And I think very much, you know that, that it comes from within, it is not unwillingness.
11. F: Yes. Could you say that once again.
12. T: Eh, I do not think that Fahd is unwilling, only it is rather a kind of incapacity. And then...
13. F: No, he immediately...
14. T: ....would it?
15. F: sits at the computer on his lazy bum
16. T: [laughs]
17. (...)
18. F: But if you say, could you empty the dish washer
19. T: Yes
20. F: You know
21. T: [laughing] yes, yes
22. F: I see only laziness.
23. T: Yes, yes. At school, he has worked a whole lot better.
24. F: He has changed, you know that
25. T: We had a talk last year, and I saw him change enormously. He really started working.
26. F: But not a hundred percent. I saw it, too, but not a hundred percent.
27. T: No, yes, OK, yes.
28. F: still (?)

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29. T: No, that is something I consider as something from within, it is no unwillingness. Eh, it has not been diagnosed, so I cannot mention it on the form.

The teacher started telling the father that “we think” that Fahd has ADHD (using the plural suggesting that her opinion is shared by the other teachers of the school), but that she cannot mention that on the form because there is no official diagnosis (turn 1). The father reacted by stating that he does not think that his son has ADHD (turn 5). In his view, Fahd’s problems originate from his laziness (turn 7), and he supported his statement with examples from the boy’s behaviour at home (13 to 22). The teacher reacted that Fahd is not unwilling to work, but that his problems have to do with, as she expressed it, “a kind of incapacity” (turn 12), “something from within”, “no unwillingness” (29). She added, that he has improved lately (25), which the father said he has also seen, but the improvement is, in his terms, “not a hundred percent” (26).

The teachers in the cases of Fouzia and Fahd were inclined to frame the problems they saw with the children in terms of psychological traits and recommended psychological examination, whereas migrant parents did not follow the teacher and opposed a psychological characterization. Migrant parents preferred to describe their children in behavioural terms, emphasizing effort as the key to school success as was also evident in an earlier study focussed on the joint construction of explanations for school success (De Haan & Wissink, 2013). Teachers’ psychological view on children can plausibly be seen as part of their professional training and identity, whereas many first generation migrants in the Netherlands have received only a few years of education and may not tend to use psychological concepts and terms. For instance, Sowa, Crijnen, Bengi-Arslan & Verhulst (2000) show that Turkish migrants in the Netherlands tend to interpret psychosocial problems of their children in somatic, rather than psychological terms. The point we would like to emphasize is not so much that migrant parents do not have psychological explanations in their repertoire (we don’t know), but that they oppose the teacher’s interpretation by bringing up their own culturally informed understanding of the situation, which they use to strengthen their position in the conversation. Difference then, is not just used or applied, it is also constructed, enlarged and stressed in the dialogue in strategic ways.

Another ideological difference which the teacher and parents sometimes could not bridge was the fact that the teachers emphasized that parents are co-responsible for the pupil’s behavior at school and even for the child’s school success. In the communication with Dutch parents, this was something that was never questioned, it was rather an assumption shared by the teacher and the parents. But some migrant parents rejected this idea and told that they were not teachers and were not knowledgeable of the school subjects (see also De Haan, Elbers & Wissink, 2012). This was clearly visible in the conferences in which the teachers criticized the pupils’ behavior at school and even after school. Parents denied any responsibility, because, as they said the boys behave well at home. For instance, in Ferit’s case, the mother claimed that he is a nice boy at home, who never misbehaves and is kind to his brothers and sisters. The teachers reacted sceptically. In their opinion, Ferit misbehaves in the classroom and after school in the playground. One of the teachers said to Ferit’s mother that she is responsible for the boy’s behaviour after school. The mother replied that nothing is

1 wrong with Ferit's behaviour after school, and that any misbehaviour is caused by the bad  
2 influence of other pupils. Again, what this example shows, is that a different understanding of  
3 what is supposed to be the role of a parent has at the same time been used to take position, to  
4 create conflict and to emphasize distance.

5 The teachers occasionally showed a paternalistic attitude to migrant parents. When  
6 Dennis's mother complained about her lack of success in making her son leave the house for  
7 school on time, the teachers advised her how to deal with her child. One of the teachers told  
8 the boy that he has to get up immediately when his mother wakes him up, and, indirectly  
9 addressing the mother, that his mother will call him only once in the morning.

### 13 3.5.Conflict talk: questioning social relationships

16 An example of a recontextualization of social relationship occurred in the conference about  
17 Naoual, who was present herself (Excerpt 2). Instead of responding to the teacher's  
18 suggestions for a particular school, the mother introduces a different perspective: the  
19 relationship between her daughter and the teacher, and, later on, her own relationship with the  
20 teacher. The mother told that her daughter does not feel at ease at the school and that she is  
21 afraid of the teacher. In her opinion, this explains the low score of her daughter on the CITO  
22 test. The class teacher initially reacted as if this was a joke, but had to take the complaint  
23 seriously and this led to mutual reproaches. When the other teacher asked the mother why she  
24 has not told her about Naoual's feeling before, the mother responded that this would not have  
25 been right, because, she says, you are older and I have to respect you (turn 33).

31 Excerpt 2.

34 The Buoy. Teacher 1 and 2 (T1, T2), Mother M and Naoual N (12 years old), Dutch-  
35 Moroccan. They discuss Naoual's score on the national test. Translated from the Dutch.

- 38
- 39 1. M: Do you know why she had this low score?
  - 40 2. T1: Hmmm?
  - 41 3. (...)
  - 42 4. M: she does not feel at home at this school.
  - 43 5. T1: No? Hmm.
  - 44 6. M: And secondly, she is terribly afraid of you
  - 45 7. T1: Ah
  - 46 8. M: She does not dare to go to school, she really does not.
  - 47 9. T1: No
  - 48 10. M: that is the truth
  - 49 11. T1: They know that they never have to be afraid of me [laughing] Why is she
  - 50 afraid?
  - 51 12. M: Yes.
  - 52 13. T1: [laughing] I hear this for the first time
  - 53 14. M: She cries, she really really does

15. (...)

16. M: if she did something wrong

17. T1: Yes, yes

18. M: she says, oh mama, how can I go to school. I am really so afraid of miss

19. (...)

20. T1: [addressing Naoual] But why didn't you tell me? (...) Why were you afraid to do that?

21. N: [cries] I don't know

22. T1: Naoual, look. You know that I.. When do I get angry at a child? If a child does not listen. That is it. But if a child cannot do it, is not able to do it, and asks for help. Even if they want to know a hundred thousand things, I ask them to sit next to me, so that I can see all the time whether they do it all right. So, I am very much surprised.

23. (...)

24. T2: I will step in now, because the tests have been made and now the school is being discussed.

25. M: OK

26. T2: And that makes me think: Naoual has been here at school from August.

27. M: Yes

28. T2: Where were you, when you noticed that things were not going well? You are the mother, you could have helped us by telling us that she is not doing well. But you weren't there.

29. (...)

30. T2: If a child behaves normally, has fun, is happy, is working, is naughty sometimes by hiding her work, then everything is right.

31. T1: Naoual, yes.

32. T2: But if we hear nothing, that means we can say nothing more at this moment, nobody can change it anymore at this moment.

33. M: No, I understand. But I have to respect you. You are the older ones.

34. T2: No, you should not have respected us, you should have respected us..

35. T1: ...by telling us immediately...

36. T2: ...when you noticed that she was not doing well.

This conversation led to bitter differences and was finished without a clear result. The discussion on Naoual's advice was postponed by the teachers to a later moment. This fragment shows that the teachers reproach the mother for not having been in touch with the school before about her child's unhappiness. They appeal to the mother's responsibility for the pupil's wellbeing. In her reaction the mother makes clear that the respect she feels for the teacher forbade her to confront the teacher with her child's complaints. The teachers, completing each other's utterances, tell her that respect, in their view, would have amounted to the opposite reaction.

This fragment shows that the teachers and the parent seem to operate in the conversation from different understandings of school home relationships, parental guidance

1 and respect. The teacher and the parent offer differing interpretations of Naoual's problems at  
2 school. The teacher's view on Naoual was recontextualized by the mother by bringing up both  
3 the child's precarious relationship with her teacher and also her own relationship with the  
4 teacher. From the perspective of the parent, respecting the teacher leads to not intervening in  
5 the student-teacher relationship and trusting the teachers' ways of dealing with her child.  
6 From the perspective of the teachers, however, respect means involvement, transparency,  
7 reporting back and direct communication between parent and teacher. The cultural  
8 differences, such as in this case different conceptions of school-home relations or respect, are  
9 not the reason why this conflict evolves. Rather they are strategically used in this dialogue by  
10 recontextualizing what was said in a different cultural frame to gain a better position in the  
11 conflict, or to convince the other.  
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#### 16 4. Discussion 17 18

19 The first goal we set in this study was descriptive; it concerned the participation of migrant  
20 parents in the conferences and, particularly, their involvement in conflicts and their resolution.  
21 We found a considerable amount of conflict in the talks, in particular with migrant parents. In  
22 our study, native Dutch parents and the one migrant couple with a high educational level who  
23 had a conflict with the teacher succeeded in influencing the advice and the description of the  
24 child on the form. They mobilized their skills and resources with success to reach a  
25 compromise with the teacher. The other migrant parents in conflict situations were not so  
26 successful; they had to accept conditions, listen to teachers criticizing their children and the  
27 way they were brought up, and they had to acquiesce in the teacher's point of view.  
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32 These results are in line with the outcomes of other studies on parent involvement  
33 (Guo & Mohan, 2008; Kim, 2009). It is easy to imagine that some migrant parents,  
34 disagreeing with the teachers, must have experienced the feeling that they were not  
35 understood and found themselves at a loss on how to convince the teachers of their view. The  
36 teachers, on their part and surely in the best of intentions, sometimes behaved patronizingly  
37 and with disbelief when the parents told them that their children were obedient and kind at  
38 home. The mutual distrust in parent-teacher talks has been documented by Archer & Francis  
39 (2007) who showed that teachers even viewed with disapproval parents of successful pupils,  
40 such as Chinese pupils in Britain. Likewise, migrant parents sometimes distrust teachers as  
41 was found for Mexican migrant in the USA (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), Dutch-  
42 Moroccan parents (Pels & de Haan, 2006) and in a study of communication between teachers  
43 and migrant parents in Sweden (Lunneblad & Johansson, 2012).  
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49 The participation of migrant parents was often hampered by their poor competence of  
50 the Dutch language. In some cases, this fact led to difficult situations, because there were  
51 serious problems to be dealt with and the parents could not make their opinion clear.  
52 Language problems made it difficult for these parents to promote the interests of their child.  
53 The conflicts also unveiled differences in educational ideas, both as to the way the child  
54 should be characterized and to the responsibilities of the parents and the school. Conflicts  
55 engendered the negotiation of referential and social meanings. In particular, some parents  
56 recontextualized the teacher's characterization of their child and presented alternative  
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1 explanations for the child's behaviour and achievements. Naoul's mother questioned the  
2 relationship between the child and the teacher.

3 As a second goal we wanted to explain and understand the particular nature and course  
4 of the conflicts and, in particular, why migrant parents, more than native Dutch parents, did  
5 not succeed in bringing the conflicts to a satisfactory end, but had to accept concessions and  
6 even submission to the teachers' point of view. The keen level of conflict in the conferences  
7 shows that both teachers and parents were prepared to speak up and express their differences.  
8 We do not want to explain the conflicts in the conferences with migrant parents by merely  
9 referring to cultural categories as pre-existing entities. We would rather interpret them in the  
10 light of the particular institutional character of the conferences (see Walker & MacLure,  
11 2005) as well as how the available resources were introduced and interpreted as part of the  
12 ongoing conversation. Even if parents and teachers have different ideas about the advice or  
13 the child, the way they express them is heavily shaped by how they both have to operate  
14 within the institutional setting.  
15

16 The conferences and the interests under discussion demand the teachers and parents to  
17 be clear about their points of view. Their contributions must be seen as strategic moves  
18 through the procedure: parents and teachers each with their own agendas and (professional or  
19 private) responsibilities. The teachers' presentation of their intended advice is part of the  
20 procedure. In most cases, the teachers have prepared the advice carefully as well as the way  
21 they want to describe the intellectual and social characteristics of the pupil. There have been  
22 previous consultations between the class teacher with the head teacher. A provisional advice  
23 has been given in a previous meeting with the parents. Another factor explaining why teachers  
24 express their point of view clearly and directly is that they have to account to colleagues and  
25 in particular to the secondary schools that want to have reliable information on their future  
26 pupils. The fact that the teacher has to account to the head teacher, the parents and also to the  
27 secondary school explain that there is no conflict avoidance on the part of the teachers.  
28

29 As to the parents, even parents who do not have a good command of the Dutch  
30 language, turned out to stand up for their child and tried to promote or protect their child's  
31 interests. This assertive behaviour of the parents can partly be explained by the institutional  
32 context. The parents are aware that they have to act and speak in their child's interest. But  
33 there may also be another factor, considered in the literature: the feeling of being  
34 discriminated and not being treated seriously. Harris & Goldstein (2007), in a study of the  
35 relationships between migrant parents and schools, point out that cultures are heterogeneous,  
36 so that there is no reason to expect that members of a culture react in the same way. However,  
37 they write, "it is important to understand that cultural values and behaviours emerge in  
38 response to repeated and institutional mistreatment" (p. 161). Thus, parents do not only react  
39 to the institutional setting, their reactions might also be informed by ethnically based histories  
40 of schooling and academic success.  
41

42 At the same time, it is important to emphasize that institutional communication goes  
43 together with unequal positions. The conflicts in the conferences do not take place in a neutral  
44 space, but in a context that is imbued with norms and rules dictated by the school: participants  
45 have unequal roles and rights. The interests expressed in the conferences are influenced by the  
46 institutional positions of teachers and parents. The inequality inherent in the institutional  
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1 setting is stronger for the migrant parents in comparison to the native Dutch parents, who can  
2 identify more easily with the school system and the position of the teacher. The distance  
3 between the parents and the school is larger for the migrant parents, because they have less  
4 knowledge of the institution and are less experienced in dealing with it. Here, power positions  
5 are interwoven with cultural positions (De Haan & Elbers, 2005).  
6

7 The differences expressed between teacher and parent cannot be explained solely by  
8 referring to pre-given cultural positions and practices. From a cultural production perspective  
9 we can interpret the conferences as an arena in which participants strategically shape their  
10 contributions, in some conferences to avoid conflict, or, in others, to emphasize differences  
11 and disagreement. Parents and teachers use their ideas about education to reach common  
12 ground, or, alternatively, to oppose each other and create distance from the other partner in  
13 the conversation. Although, as we have argued, these contributions are shaped by the  
14 institutional setting as well as the group histories involved, the outcome of this confrontation  
15 is not given. The explanations and attributions introduced by the teacher and the parent  
16 depend to a certain extent on how the particular conversation unfolds. They are selected and  
17 reconstructed to fit the patterns of actions; they form part of a dialogical process and thus bear  
18 the traces of the particular dialogic encounter (De Haan, Elbers, & Wissink, 2012). The  
19 conversations can be considered as a process in which cultural proximity or distance is  
20 constructed (Mannheim & Tedlock, 1995; De Haan & Elbers, 2005). However, in contrast  
21 with the idea that initial existing differences need to be worked on through conversations in  
22 order to enable communication (as in Communication Accommodation Theory, Jones et al,  
23 1999), we want to stress that the creation or avoidance of ‘difference’ also must be seen as a  
24 way of operating strategically within particular practices, in this case a particular institutional  
25 field.  
26

27 The conferences with conflicts bring to light how parents use discursive means to  
28 construct or emphasize their identities in the particular institutional context regarding the  
29 school advice. In the conferences without conflicts, migrant parents (in contrast to native  
30 Dutch parents) did not bring up these identities. The disagreements seem to have forced  
31 parents to communicate how their view differs from that of the teacher and to strengthen these  
32 differences by appealing to their respective views on the child or the school. This shows again  
33 that the particular institutional setting induced the pronunciation of these differences which  
34 otherwise would perhaps not have been expressed. Therefore, we claim that in these  
35 conferences we do not see clashes between cultural frames, but, rather, how cultural  
36 differences are evoked, emphasized, strategically used and finally also reproduced in and  
37 through the course of the conversation.  
38

39 A survey of 420 Dutch primary schools showed that, overall, schools with mainly  
40 native Dutch children talked more frequently with the parents about the advice than school  
41 with ethnic minority pupils. Moreover, the meetings about the advice led to more conflicts  
42 with minority parents (Driessen et al, 2005). Our study adds to these outcomes an insight into  
43 the actual course of the conversations between teachers and parents. This insight is relevant  
44 for how schools may improve their relationships with migrant parents, aimed at productive  
45 dialogues and even a partnership between teachers and parents (Epstein, 1987, De Haan &  
46 Wissink, 2013). Only if teachers have built up a relationship of mutual trust with the parents,  
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can their contribution to the talks inspire confidence (Wamba, 2006). The careful crafting of diverse views on each other’s identities and on when a child is considered to be successful should be part of these efforts.

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Table 1. Conflict resolution types in the conferences with disagreement

Compromise	Bram (Dutch)* Julia (Dutch) Lisa (Dutch) Onur (Turkish-Dutch)
Concession by the parent	Ferit (Moroccan-Dutch) Fouzia (Moroccan-Dutch) Omar (Moroccan-Dutch)
Submission of the parent	Dennis (Antillean-Dutch) Fahd (Turkish-Dutch) Hanane (Moroccan-Dutch) Ikram (Moroccan-Dutch) Ismail (Moroccan-Dutch) Nadhir (Moroccan-Dutch) Naoual (Moroccan-Dutch)

\*Names are pseudonyms.