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Criticizing another's child: How teachers evaluate students during parent-teacher conferences

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ABSTRACT

As the principal occasion for establishing cooperation between family and school, the parent-teacher conference is crucial to the social and educational lives of children. But there is a problem: reports of parent-teacher conflict pervade extant literature. Previous studies do not, however, explain how conflict emerges in real time or how conflict is often avoided during conferences. This article examines a diverse corpus of video-recorded naturally occurring conferences to elucidate a structural *preference organization* operative during parent-teacher interaction that enables participants to forestall conflict. Focusing on teachers' conduct around student-praise and student-criticism, this investigation demonstrates that teachers do extra interactional work when articulating student-criticism. This research explicates two of teachers' most regular actions constituting this extra work: *obfuscating responsibility* for student-troubles by omitting explicit reference to the student, and *routinizing* student-troubles by invoking other comparable cases of that same trouble. Analysis illuminates teachers' work to maintain solidarity with students, and thus parents. (Institutional interaction, parent-teacher conferences, conversation analysis, criticism, praise, evaluating students, assessments, preference organization)*

INTRODUCTION

Criticizing another person jeopardizes speaker, recipient, and relationship. Concurrently threatening all involved participants' *face* (including the desire to be approved of and liked, and the desire to be unimpeded; Brown & Levinson 1987), criticizing is a social action that potentially precipitates conflict (Tracy & Eisenberg 1990). But persons responsible for helping others to improve—including managers, parents, and teachers—MUST criticize others as part of their work. And teachers, particularly at the elementary-school level, must not only critically evaluate their students; they must also present their student-evaluations to students' parents during parent-teacher conferences—scheduled face-to-face encounters usually

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coinciding with teachers' preparation and delivery of report cards. This article examines how teachers evaluate students during these conferences.

Although scholars unanimously agree that the parent-teacher conference is a critical occasion for developing relational harmony between parents and teachers (e.g. Driscoll 1944; Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003; Lemmer 2012), the literature overwhelmingly portrays these encounters as filled with enmity (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003), characterizing parent-teacher relations as highly conflictual (Attanucci 2004). One of the most common themes pervading this literature is that parents and teachers both 'dread' conferences (Rabbitt 1978)—they fear them, find them to be 'stressful' (Lemmer 2012), 'treacherous' (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003), and even 'traumatic' because both parties 'are afraid of being blamed, attacked, or hurt' (Rabbitt 1978:471). Teachers reportedly feel trepidation because the conference constitutes 'the place where they feel their competence and their professionalism most directly challenged' (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003:xxi). And parents reportedly feel anxiety because they fear that any teacher criticism of the child is an indictment of their parenting (Driscoll 1944). In short, parents and teachers approach conferences apprehensive about being CRITICIZED.

Although reports of parent-teacher conflict are pervasive and widely accepted, previous studies do not analyze the details of actual parent-teacher conference interaction to explicate how conflict emerges and unfolds in real time. Instead, these investigations describe individual parents' or teachers' personal narrative accounts of their past conference experiences. For example, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), Attanucci (2004), and Lemmer (2012) each describe individuals' recalled conference experiences gleaned through interviews and/or focus groups, finding that subjects tended to focus on reporting out-of-the-ordinary conference moments in which they experienced intense disagreement or conflict. There is, of course, a general human tendency to pay more attention to negative rather than neutral or positive experiences (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs 2001); it is thus not surprising that the currently available literature on traditional parent-teacher conferences presumes that parents and teachers find these conferences problematic (Minke & Anderson 2003) and therefore consists largely of prescriptive 'tips' for how participants 'should' interact (e.g. Harvard Family Research Project 2010).

A recent line of research, however, analyzes video-recorded naturally occurring parent-teacher conferences to explicate the regular methods participants use to FORESTALL CONFLICT. Focusing primarily on parents' interactional conduct, Pillet-Shore (2015a) shows that conference participants orient to parents' preemptive student-criticizing actions as maximizing the likelihood of affiliation (cf. Heritage 1984) and minimizing the likelihood of conflict due to face threat (cf. Goffman 1967; Brown & Levinson 1987): when a parent articulates a student-trouble that the teacher had been planning to mention, the teacher can avoid explicitly criticizing the student and instead agree with and build upon what the parent has already said. And when a parent is first to articulate a student-trouble, s/he thereby displays

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prior knowledge of that trouble—a key method through which parents present themselves as involved caregivers who are reasonable, credible perceivers of their own children. Correlatively, Pillet-Shore (2012) investigates the social action of praising, demonstrating that parents work to avoid praising students when interacting with teachers—a tacit way of displaying that they are fair appraisers of their own children.

To complement these previous studies' findings about PARENTS' conduct, the current article focuses on TEACHERS' conduct during student-evaluating sequences. This article examines a diverse corpus of video-recorded naturally occurring conferences to elucidate a structural *preference organization* operative during parent-teacher interaction that enables participants to forestall conflict. Analyzing the precise way teachers design their student-praising and student-criticizing utterances, this research demonstrates that teachers do extra interactional work when articulating student-criticism. This article explicates two of teachers' most regular actions constituting this extra work: *obfuscating responsibility* for student-troubles by omitting explicit reference to the student, and *routinizing* student-troubles by invoking other comparable cases of that same trouble. Analysis illuminates teachers' work to maintain solidarity with students, and thus parents.

DATA AND METHOD

For this study, I conducted three years of fieldwork in four different public and private schools from three different school districts in a large metropolitan area in the western United States. In addition to doing ethnographic interviewing and observation, I video-recorded forty-one naturally occurring parent-teacher conferences (each of which is thirty to seventy minutes in duration) involving fourteen teachers and sixty-one parents/caregivers discussing students ranging in grade level from preschool (aged ~ four years) through seventh grade (aged ~ twelve years). The academic standing of the students discussed in the conferences varies widely, ranging from students earning an 'A' or equivalent grade to a student earning an 'F' in the teacher's class. Many different parent/caregiver and family types are represented, including biogenetic and adoptive parents/caregivers, grandparents with legal custody of the children, single parents, married/cohabiting parents, and divorced/noncohabiting parents. All conference interactions were conducted in English. Participants are demographically diverse in terms of age, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity, and several participants are nonnative but fluent English speakers. Each conference occurred as part of the schools' and teachers' regular conference schedule. This study examines traditional conference interactions during which focal students are not invited to attend or participate.

I analyzed my data using the procedures, framework, and body of literature associated with the interdisciplinary field of conversation analysis (CA). CA is a data-driven methodology tailor-made for the analysis of recorded occasions of naturally situated interaction. Analysis begins and proceeds with repeated examination of

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recordings and the making of detailed transcripts[1] that enable the analyst to discover and represent in graphic form fleeting details of participants' visible and audible social actions (thereby forestalling averaging and idealization; Heritage 1984). Recordings also allow other researchers direct access to the data for independent verification of findings. The goal of CA is to uncover and document systematic practices of human social conduct. Toward this end, I collected every sequence in which at least one conference participant CRITICIZES the focal nonpresent student by producing an utterance that reflects unfavorably on that student, displaying a negative stance toward and/or treating as a trouble requiring remedy some issue about that student's academic performance, behavior, and/or effort. I examined each sequence on its own terms while at the same time examining them as a collection. To develop the details of my analysis, I closely examined fifty such sequences. I juxtaposed this collection with a collection of forty sequences in which at least one conference participant PRAISES the focal student by delivering an utterance that reflects favorably on that student, including positively valenced assessments of, and statements of, favorable facts about the student (also see Pillet-Shore 2012, 2015a).

PREFERENCE ORGANIZATION OF PARENT-TEACHER INTERACTION

Although both teachers and parents deliver utterances that praise and criticize focal students, there is marked contrast between HOW and WHEN they each do these actions. This contrast is embodied in a structural *preference organization*—systematic sequential properties of turn and sequence construction through which participants manage courses of action that either promote or undermine social solidarity (Heritage 1984; Schegloff 2007a). On the one hand, parents routinely criticize students/their own children straightforwardly—without delay, qualification/mitigation, or account (Pillet-Shore 2015a). The CA term for these properties of turn/sequence design is *preferred* (Heritage 1984; Schegloff 2007a). On the other hand, teachers systematically delay, qualify/mitigate, and/or account for their criticisms of students. The CA term for this alternative nonstraightforward turn/sequence design is *dispreferred*. Reciprocally, whereas parents treat their articulation of student-praising utterances as structurally dispreferred (i.e. working to avoid praising students; delaying, qualifying, and accounting for their student-praising utterances; Pillet-Shore 2012, 2015a), teachers praise students in the preferred format, delivering these utterances straightforwardly. This preference organization is outlined in Table 1.

Excerpt (1) exemplifies this holistic preference organization. Teacher (T) is displaying 'category report' documents to the fourth-grade student's legal guardian Grandma (GM).[2] After announcing that she has a pile of these documents ('e:m' at line 1) for all the subjects—with each document showing a detailed evaluation of the student's performance in a particular subject category—Teacher pulls out

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TABLE 1. *Preference organization of parent-teacher interaction.*

	CRITICIZING STUDENT	PRAISING STUDENT
PARENT/CAREGIVER	preferred	dispreferred
TEACHER	dispreferred	preferred

a document on the student's writing (line 3), placing it on the tabletop facing Grandma. During the silence at line 4, Grandma starts to look at this writing document as Teacher mobilizes the next category report document. Just as Teacher is starting to name this next document's subject at line 5, Grandma indexes her continued orientation to the writing document. At lines 6, 8, and 10, Grandma articulates a criticism of the student's writing, offering her own negative evaluation specifically before Teacher articulates her assessment of the student's writing. Teacher facilitates Grandma being first to articulate this criticism by delaying her own delivery of additional details about the writing evaluation document (e.g. at line 4).

(1) [07a]

1	T:	We have 'e:m for all thuh su:bject[s.
2	GM:	[O:ka#:y.
3	T:	Here's one fer: writing? ((T placing document in front of GM))
4		(1.0)/((GM looking at, touching writing document))
5	T:	(Then/An') here'[s one- ((T mobilizing next document))
6	GM:	[*His wri:ting skills. ↑°Wel-° An'=
7		((*GM doing lateral headshake; T retracts next document))
8	GM:	=he's-? d- uhhuh! [.hh °W'l° *I think= ((*GM brings palms to chest))
9	T:	[Yeah.
10	GM:	=they're te:rrible.*But what I'm seeing he:re,it's: uh:¿
11		((*GM lowers hand from chest to document))
12	T:	*This:? is an indicator that= ((*T pointing to spot on document))
13		=he's really watching me= ((T, GM gazing down at document))
14		=in cla:ss?=Cause we go over all th[is dee oh el=
15	GM:	[Mkay,
16	T:	=bufore he se:es i[t.
17	GM:	[pt!
18	T:	.hh So, (.) that to me:, (0.3)*/((*T lifts gaze to GM))
19		He's- (.)* wi:th me? ((*GM lifts gaze to meet T's gaze))
20		He's wa:tching? He's lea:rning?* ((*GM shifts gaze to doc))
21		[He's re*me:mbering? ((*T shifts gaze to doc))
22	GM:	[ptch! °Okay,°
23	T:	.hh An' then when I: give him a: (0.4)* ((*T, GM in mutual gaze))
24		>test at thee end a thuh we:ek.< He recalls

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25 [what it was thet= ((T, GM gazing down at document))
26 GM: [°Oka:y.°
27 T: =we ta:lked about. .hh Now if we looked at (.) his
28 (.) actual writing? Yesh.You're righ[t.We'r:e=
29 GM: [Yeah.
30 T: =We'r:e (0.3) >havin' a li:ttle bit a difficulty
31 there.

Through the design of her utterance at lines 6, 8, and 10, Grandma treats her articulation of a negative assessment of her grandson's writing differently than her articulation of a positive assessment. On the one hand, Grandma produces her talk CRITICIZING the student's writing skills (e.g. '°W'l° I think they're te:rrible.') fluently and without mitigation or qualification, treating her articulation of this student-criticism as preferred (Pillet-Shore 2015a). On the other hand, Grandma produces her talk projecting delivery of a PRAISING comment ('An' he's-? d-uhhuh!'; 'But what I'm seeing he:re,it's: uh:¿') with a series of speech disfluencies, cutting off her in-progress talk each time it projects student-praise (Pillet-Shore 2012; cf. Lerner 2013) and ultimately suppressing her articulation of a favorable assessment altogether via trail-off. Grandma thereby displays her reluctance to articulate the projected praising assessment of her grandson that she sees on Teacher's document. Through her work to avoid explicitly stating a favorable assessment of the student, Grandma treats her articulation of student-praise as dispreferred (Pillet-Shore 2012).

Reciprocally, through the design of her utterances spanning lines 12 through 31, Teacher treats her articulation of a positive evaluation of the student's writing differently than her articulation of a negative evaluation. On the one hand, Teacher prioritizes explicating the part of the writing evaluation document that shows a positive student-evaluation (lines 12–27), producing her talk PRAISING the student's attentiveness and retention (e.g. at lines 13–14 and 20–21) fluently (without speech perturbations, e.g. sound cut-offs or silences)[3] and straightforwardly, without delay, mitigation, qualification, or account. During this portion of her turn, Teacher also uses the pronoun 'he' consistently to explicitly refer to the student as the agent responsible for doing the formulated actions (e.g. watching, learning, remembering). Through these design features, Teacher displays her orientation to her articulation of this student-praise as preferred.

On the other hand, Teacher delays her explicit acknowledgement of a negative student-evaluation until midway into line 27.[4] Teacher produces her talk CRITICIZING the student's 'actual writing' nonfluently, allowing small silences to develop at lines 27, 28, and 30, and repeating 'We'r:e' at lines 28 and 30. Teacher also designs this portion of her turn less straightforwardly, mitigating the student-criticism (with 'a li:ttle bit') and delaying mention of the student's 'difficulty' until lines 30–31. By including 'Yesh.You're right' at line 28, Teacher positions the incipient, negatively valenced portion of her utterance as an explicit agreement with Grandma's prior

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critical assessment, which also works to further delay Teacher's articulation of this student-criticism. In addition, Teacher's selection of 'We'r:e' at lines 28 and 30 is significant, constituting a switch from her consistent use of the pronoun 'he' (from lines 12–27, during which the valence of her student-evaluating utterance was POSITIVE) to 'we' right when the valence of her student-evaluating utterance turns NEGATIVE. By shifting from 'he' to 'we', Teacher avoids directly referring to the student as the agent responsible for this trouble (cf. Drew & Heritage 1992:31). Thus, through the timing and design of her utterances at lines 27–31, Teacher treats her articulation of student-criticism as dispreferred.

Excerpt (1) shows how parents and teachers can tacitly collaborate to produce sequences in which a PARENT is first to articulate a particular student-trouble (Pillet-Shore 2015a) courtesy of the complementarity built into the preference organization outlined in Table 1. But this does not mean that teachers escape their institutional obligation of articulating student-criticism. The rest of this article focuses on TEACHERS' interactional conduct during student-evaluating sequences (further exemplifying the teacher row of Table 1) to complement extant analyses of PARENTS' interactional conduct around both student-praise and student-criticism (see Pillet-Shore 2012, 2015a for further exemplification of the parent/caregiver row of Table 1).

Building upon the analysis of excerpt (1), which revealed a contrast between how and when a teacher articulates student-praise versus student-criticism, the next section analyzes teachers' student-evaluating utterances in many different conferences to demonstrate that the contrast exemplified in (1) is indeed a systematic, pervasive phenomenon.

TEACHERS' INITIATING ACTIONS: DELIVERING STUDENT-PRAISE VERSUS STUDENT-CRITICISM

Focusing on the precise way teachers produce their sequence/topic-initial actions, this section shows that teachers design their student-evaluating utterances differently in regular, patterned ways that are sensitive to the valence of the evaluation. Data demonstrate that, whereas teachers produce their student-PRAISING utterances fluently, straightforwardly, and with an active grammatical construction that incorporates explicit reference to the student as the responsible agent—thereby treating their articulation of student-triumphs as preferred—they produce their student-CRITICIZING utterances nonfluently, nonstraightforwardly, and with a grammatical construction that omits explicit reference to the student as the responsible agent—thereby treating their articulation of student-troubles as dispreferred.

Excerpt (2) shows Teacher delivering an utterance that praises the sixth-grade student, favorably assessing his performance on a recent project by announcing that he earned the highest letter grade possible. (Target utterances appear in **bold**.)

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(2) [03]
1 T: **Right now he got a project in an I'm sure he got**
2 **uh A if not A plus.**
3 M: Oh good.

Teacher produces her talk fluently (without speech perturbations, e.g. sound cut-offs or silences). Teacher also designs her talk straightforwardly, without delay, mitigation, qualification, account, or uncertainty—indeed Teacher uses upgraded certainty with her 'I'm sure'. In terms of grammatical construction, Teacher designs her utterance with an active voice, using the pronoun 'he' (twice) to explicitly refer to the student as the agent responsible for doing the formulated actions (e.g. getting an A/A+). Teacher's use of the pronoun 'he' in this context is the unmarked reference to the student (i.e. the locally subsequent reference form in locally subsequent position; Schegloff 1996).

Excerpts (3) and (4) further exemplify this pattern. In (3), Teacher praises the third-grade student by favorably assessing her performance on a writing assignment that she is displaying to Mom (M) and Dad. After formulating the timing and topic of the writing assignment (line 1), Teacher articulates two positive evaluations: at line 2 she announces that the student received the highest possible quantitative score, and at line 3 she appends a qualitative summary assessment.

(3) [20]
1 T: **In October they wrote about a perfect da:y¿**
2 **An' again she's got four outta fou:r¿ pt! .h An'**
3 **has done a great jo:b?**
4 M: (>umhm<) hih heh hah hah hah (.) .hhh[h!=
5 T: [ptch!
6 M: =u::hh S'unna be fun tuh read.=

Teacher designs each of her student-praising utterances (at lines 2–3) fluently, straightforwardly, and with an active construction, using the unmarked pronoun 'she' to explicitly refer to the student as the agent responsible for getting the 'four outta fou:r' and doing 'a great jo:b'.

Excerpt (4) shows Teacher positively assessing the first-grade student's performance in math from the beginning of the academic year (September) up to the present conference time (December). At lines 1–2 Teacher delivers two summary assessments, first deploying a vernacularly accessible discursive term of evaluation ('really well'), and then deploying a report-card-specific term of evaluation ('met all thuh standar:ds'). After presenting Mom with a sample math test, Teacher assesses the student again at line 7 by stating that she earned the highest percentage possible.

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(4) [10a]
1 T: **As far as math, she's doin' really well,=**
2 **=She's met all thuh standar:ds.** *Um: This is our:: (0.4)
3 ((*T shifts gaze to test, placing it over report card))
4 T: You've seen thee other tests.But this
5 [was just one tes:t of like all=
6 M: [Yeah.
7 T: =of thuh skills,**A[n' she gotta hundred percent,**
8 M: [Oh okay.

Teacher produces all three of her student-praising TCUs fluently and straightforwardly, designing each with an active construction (at lines 1–2 and line 7) that uses the unmarked pronoun 'she' to explicitly refer to the student as the subject responsible for doing the formulated actions.

Thus, as the preceding exemplars demonstrate, teachers systematically produce their student-praising utterances fluently, straightforwardly, and with an active grammatical construction that incorporates explicit reference to the student as the subject/agent responsible for the triumph. When articulating student-criticizing utterances, however, teachers use polar opposite design features, as exemplified by the next several exemplars.

Excerpt (5) shows Teacher initiating a sequence about the fourth-grade student's performance in social science by displaying a document showing her detailed negative evaluation to the student's Mom and Dad (D).

(5) [06]
1 T: **.hh Thisiz um:: (.) I've kindof (1.2)**
2 ((T pointing to document; T, M, D gazing at document;
3 M's arms crossed at her chest throughout sequence))
4 T: **This iz: °u#h° social science¿**
5 **(0.8)**
6 D: °Mmhm.°
7 T: **So:, um if I'm looking at (2.2)**
8 ((T moves pen laterally along a row on document))
9 T: **>thuh different categories thisiz helpful**
10 **to me.Thisiz classwork¿<**
11 **(0.3)**/((T points to spot on document; T shifts gaze to M;
12 M sustains gaze down at document, doing lateral headshake))
13 T: **Yihknow um:: (.) First time throu:gh¿**
14 **(0.3)**/((T gazes at M; M sustains gaze down at document))
15 T: ***Papers ^that she's giving: (.) to me¿** ((*T does circular
16 gesture with right hand; ^M lifts gaze to establish mutual gaze with T))
17 **(.)**/((M shifts gaze to document, does rapid/shallow nod))
18 T: **An: (0.8) *you probly m- (.)** ((*T gazing at M))
19 T: **I cin tell you- probly know*** ((*M returns gaze to T))

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20 **what I m:- mea[n.>It's yuh- Yihknow it's thuh=**
21 M: [pt!*O:h yeah, ((*M shifts gaze to document))
22 T: **=sLOp (.) that I get, thuh- thuh (.)**
23 M: Mm[hm, ((M's eyebrows raised, headshaking))
24 T: **[(I'm dumb:/undone), Not- Not really showing me what she**
25 **really knows,**

Through a series of speech disfluencies, Teacher manifests difficulty articulating the critical student-evaluation captured on the document that she is concurrently displaying to Mom and Dad. These disfluencies include: at line 1, her delay via lengthened 'um::' and micropause, and her restart and qualification ('I've kindof') followed by a sizeable silence; at line 4, her restart and delay via '°u#h°'; at line 7, her 'um' and 2.2-sec silence; at line 13, her stretched 'um::'; her silences at line 18; and her sound cut-offs and self-repairs at lines 18–20, 22, and 24. In addition, from lines 1 through 13, Teacher omits explicit reference to the student as the agent responsible for the trouble, avoiding use of the unmarked possessive pronoun 'her' (e.g. before 'classwork' at line 10) and using ellipsis or zero anaphora at line 13 (dropping the pronoun before 'First time throu:gh'; Oh 2006). Teacher also designs her utterance at line 15 with a syntax that makes the object of the sentence ('Papers') more prominent than the subject (the student responsible for those papers), thereby prioritizing reference to the student's work product (rather than referring to the student per se).

With her actions at lines 18–20, Teacher visibly and audibly works to elicit and co-implicate Mom's agreeing perspective in her presentation of this negative student-evaluation (cf. Maynard 1992:333). It is only after Teacher secures Mom's confirmation at line 21 (which Mom designs as an *oh*-prefaced agreement, conveying her epistemic independence to the criticizable referent; Heritage 2002; Pillet-Shore 2015a) that Teacher articulates her first negatively valenced word 'sLOp' to characterize the student's work product. In addition, at lines 20 and 22, Teacher uses the definite article 'thuh' instead of using the unmarked possessive pronoun 'her' that would have referred directly to the student as the agent responsible for this work. Teacher immediately follows her negative characterization of the student's quality of work with an account (at lines 24–25) that dichotomizes WHAT THE STUDENT KNOWS (i.e. her potential/ability) versus WHAT SHE SHOWS SHE KNOWS (i.e. her actual work product; Pillet-Shore 2014).[5] Thus, over the course of this sequence, Teacher delivers her student-criticism nonstraightforwardly by delaying her articulation of her first negatively valenced word 'sLOp' until line 22, and then accounting for the student's trouble.

Excerpts (6) and (7) further exemplify this pattern. Excerpt (6) shows Teacher delivering utterances that criticize the third-grade student by negatively evaluating her performance on homework.

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(6) [14]
1 T: **Thuh quality of work that comes i:n (0.2) indicates**
2 **one level of achievement(,/.)**
3 (.)
4 T: **And it's no:t where Cathy i:[s.**
5 M: [Yeah.
6 T: **It's lower than that.**
7 M: °Yeah.°=

Teacher produces her talk nonfluently, allowing small silences to develop at lines 1 and 3. And rather than delivering her student-criticism straightforwardly, Teacher delays her articulation of both her explicit reference to the student (until line 4), and her first explicit evaluative term 'lower' (until line 6). At lines 1–2, Teacher designs her utterance with an ergative construction ('Thuh quality of work' is the subject, but this subject cannot undertake the action 'comes i:n'), omitting explicit reference to the student as the agent responsible for doing the formulated action (i.e. Teacher omits the possessive pronoun 'her' that would have referred directly to the student as the subject responsible for 'Thuh quality of work'). Over the course of her utterances, Teacher disaggregates the student's work product from the student herself, invoking two independent versions (cf. Pillet-Shore 2006) of the student's achievement: 'where CATHY is' (line 4; i.e. Cathy's potential and capability for a higher level of achievement) versus 'where the QUALITY OF CATHY'S WORK is' (line 1; i.e. Cathy's actual lower level of achievement; see n. 5). In addition, Teacher's use of the student's first name 'Cathy' at line 4 is the marked reference form (the locally initial reference form in locally subsequent position; Schegloff 1996).

Like (4), excerpt (7) shows Teacher assessing the student's performance in math from the beginning of the academic year up to the present conference time (December). But unlike (4), excerpt (7) shows Teacher to NOT explicitly articulate an evaluation of the student's performance. Instead, Teacher implies a student-criticism by displaying a document showing the student's low math scores to Mom.

(7) [09]
1 T: **.hh Um. (0.7) Here's thuh ma:th?**
2 M: Oka:y,=
3 T: **=Math s[cores?**
4 M: [.nhh ((sniff))
5 T: **A::n' it's thuh math thet we're: (1.5)/((T points to**
6 **student's report card; M's gaze follows T's point))**
7 T: **we have a concern about.=**
8 M: =Right.

Teacher produces her talk nonfluently with several speech perturbations: the delay via 'Um' at line 1, and the stretched 'A::n' at line 5; the silences at lines 1 and 5; the

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self-repair of 'ma:th' to 'Math scores' at lines 1 and 3, and the self-repair of 'we're' to 'we have a' at lines 5 and 7. Through this latter repair, Teacher works to mitigate the scope of the student's trouble. And rather than delivering her student-criticism straightforwardly, Teacher delays her articulation of her first negatively valenced term 'concern' until line 7. Teacher also omits explicit reference to the student, using the definite article 'thuh' at lines 1 and 5 instead of using the unmarked possessive pronoun 'his' that would have referred directly to the student as the agent responsible for the math scores.

Thus far, this article has demonstrated that, whereas teachers produce their student-PRAISING utterances fluently, straightforwardly, and with an active grammatical construction that incorporates explicit reference to the student as the responsible agent—thereby treating their articulation of student-triumphs as preferred, they produce their student-CRITICIZING utterances nonfluently, nonstraightforwardly, and with a grammatical construction that omits explicit reference to the student as the responsible agent—thereby treating their articulation of student-troubles as dispreferred. These findings about the structural regularities of teachers' student-evaluating actions are so robust that they are observable when examining the same teacher's student-praising versus student-criticizing utterances over the course of one short sequence of interaction. In excerpt (8), Teacher delivers three praising summary assessments about the seventh-grade student from lines 1 through 8, designing each of these straightforwardly and with an active construction that incorporates explicit reference to the student. At line 10, however, Teacher delivers one mild student-criticism—'Uh:: (.) Li:ttle socialization'—registering the student's tendency to be a bit too social or talkative in class.

(8) [02]
1 T: He's getting all of his assignments in:,
2 [.hhh so: (.) (ehyeah/yihknow).=
3 [((M moves gaze up from doc to T, starts nodding))
4 T: =He- (.) he's really one uh thuh- one uh thuh
5 starz in the class in thet (.) I don't have tih .hh
6 constan- JASON. WHERe's yer HOMEWORK.
7 M: Ri[:ght,
8 T: [He's: (.) always got it in:,
9 (0.5)
10 T: **.hh Uh:: (.) Li:ttle socialization,**
11 **but (.)/((open palms gesture))**
12 M: (Ah) tha[t doesn't surpri::se me
13 T: **[it's- it's seventh £gra:de.hh[h hih heh hhhh**
14 M: [Yea(h)h

Teacher positions his one unfavorable evaluation of the student late in this sequence, only after having first delivered a series of favorable student-evaluations (Pillet 2001; see n. 4). After allowing a silence to develop at line 9, Teacher does

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a turn-initial delay via 'Uh:: (.)' at line 10. He then designs his utterance to omit explicit reference to the student: Teacher avoids articulating a pronoun by employing ellipsis or zero anaphora (Oh 2006), and by formulating the criticizable student behavior as a noun ('socialization') rather than as a verb (e.g. by instead saying, 'He socializes a little too much'). Immediately after articulating this student-criticism, Teacher minimizes its significance through his 'but' plus open palms gesture at line 11, and his normalizing account at line 13 (see the next section for further discussion of teachers' use of such student categories as accounts), during which he smiles and then laughs to further mitigate this trouble.

In sum, this section has demonstrated that, compared with how they articulate student-praise, teachers do EXTRA interactional work when they articulate student-criticism. SOME of this extra work—particularly that involved in producing a student-criticizing utterance nonstraightforwardly (i.e. with delay, qualification/mitigation, and/or account)—is connoted by describing teachers' design of their student-criticisms as *dispreferred*. But the preceding analysis shows that, when articulating student-praise versus student-criticism, teachers use a systematic set of polar opposite design features, several of which operate at levels of analytic granularity that TRANSCEND extant definitions of dis/preferred formats (cf. Heritage 1984; Schegloff 2007a). The present research thus extends CA work on preference by explicating how teachers design their student-evaluating utterances to be hearably preferred or dispreferred at the additional analytic levels of prosody (fluent versus nonfluent speech), person reference (inclusion versus omission of explicit reference to the student), and grammar (active versus passive or ergative construction).

Beyond elucidating the regular sets of design features that teachers use to articulate student-evaluating utterances, the foregoing analysis has uncovered a recurrent ACTION that teachers perform when articulating student-criticism: the action of *obfuscating responsibility* for the student-trouble. Teachers perform this action by systematically omitting explicit reference to focal students—for example, through their use of ergative (instead of active) construction (e.g. excerpt (6), line 1), ellipsis (e.g. excerpt (5), line 13; excerpt (8), line 10), and/or the definite article 'the' (e.g. excerpt (5), lines 20, 22) or first-person plural pronoun 'we' (instead of a third-person singular pronoun 's/he' or possessive 'her/his'; e.g. excerpt (1), line 30). Through this action, teachers work to specifically NOT EXPLICITLY ASSIGN RESPONSIBILITY for the student's trouble to the student her/himself, thereby reducing the face-threatening potential of the student-criticism (to students and parents).

By producing their student-criticizing utterances nonfluently, nonstraightforwardly, and with a grammatical construction that omits explicit reference to the student as the responsible agent, teachers treat their articulation of student-troubles as interactionally delicate, displaying unease about what they are saying. This finding relates to, but is distinct from, Lerner's (2013) findings about how speakers voice potentially transgressive or taboo terms/topics (e.g. vulgar expletives, talk about sex or death, derogatory references to persons). There is, however, nothing ostensibly taboo about teachers' articulation of student-criticism, since conference

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participants normatively expect teachers to critically evaluate students as part of the official, explicitly sanctioned business of the parent-teacher conference (Pillet 2001; Pillet-Shore 2012). Despite the fact that teachers operate under an institutional injunction to express student-troubles, this article demonstrates that teachers still treat their own student-criticizing actions as interpersonally sensitive. While the preceding section elucidates one of the most regular actions that teachers perform to manage this sensitivity when INITIATING student-criticizing sequences, namely *obfuscating responsibility* for the student-trouble, the next section examines one of the most regular actions that teachers perform to manage this sensitivity SUBSEQUENT to a participant's articulation of student-criticism: *routinizing* the student-trouble.

TEACHERS' SUBSEQUENT ACTIONS: ROUTINIZING STUDENT-TROUBLES

Data in this section show that, in the sequence immediately following a conference participant's articulation of a particular student-trouble, teachers regularly perform the action of *routinizing* that student-trouble, shifting from the focal student's case by invoking other comparable case(s) of that same trouble. Through this action, teachers situate the focal student and her/his trouble—and by association, that student's parent/caregiver(s)—within a larger social category of like others with whom the teacher has had experience. I term this action *routinizing* because it constitutes the focal student-trouble as more routine or common and thus as NOT UNIQUE to the current student/parent(s).[6]

One explicit way teachers *routinize* is by extending the scope of the focal trouble to include multiple students. Excerpts (9) and (10) both show teachers doing this action in *third position* (Schegloff 1992), responding to their interlocutor/parent's uptake of the teacher's immediately preceding sequence-initiating utterance implicating student-criticism.

In excerpt (9), Teacher launches the topic of the third-grade student's math performance at lines 1–2. Designed as a positive observation about (and positive 'spin' on) the student's math scores, Teacher's utterance implies an unfavorable assessment through the formulation of the student as metaphorically 'hangin' on'. Precisely timed to start in overlap with Teacher's first negatively valenced word (hangin'), Mom does a rollercoaster hand gesture. Mom's gesture and subsequent talk display her prior knowledge of the student's math trouble (Pillet-Shore 2015a), thus enabling Teacher to agree with her (via 'Ye:ah.' at line 5). Teacher responds to Mom's uptake by extending the scope of that trouble to 'evrybody'.

(9) [04]
1 T: As far as ma:th go:es, he's- (.) he's
2 T: [*hangin' on.
3 M: [((*M starts to lift her right hand to do an up/down
4 rollercoaster gesture))

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5 T: [There's- It's- Y e: a h.
6 M: [°It's (.) like this.° It's up (.) and down.
7 T: **Wh[ich is::(.) if you feel bette:r (.)=**
8 M: [It's:: (.) erratic.
9 T: **=I- >I shoulda wrote a note home< to thuh parents.Because**
10 **that's happening with (0.7) evrybody.with this math**
11 **program.**

By beginning line 7 with the pronoun 'Which', Teacher designs this as a collaborative utterance fitted to Mom's preceding actions, and indicates that her incipient talk will provide further information contextualizing (and ultimately mitigating) the prior unfavorable summary assessment of the student's math performance. But Teacher then self-initiates self-repair to interpolate two distinct utterances between 'Which is::' and 'happening' (at line 10): the first utterance explicitly formulates an account for why Teacher is producing the prospective portion of her utterance (to make Mom feel better); and the next inserted utterance is a self-admonishment registering Teacher's failure to provide advance notification of this issue to all members of the larger category 'parents' (to which of course Mom belongs). By generically invoking 'thuh parents' and stating 'that's happening with (0.7) evrybody', Teacher situates both her current addressed-recipient Mom alongside all of her other students' parents, and the focal student alongside all of her other students. Teacher's action of routinizing by enacting a shift from the individual to the universal implicitly blames the math program, thereby normalizing and detoxifying this student-trouble.

Excerpt (10) shows a similar pattern, except in this case perhaps because Teacher cannot extend the focal seventh-grade student's trouble to all of his students, he invokes 'a couple' other similar cases with which he has had experience. At lines 1–2, Teacher articulates the student-trouble to the student's legal guardian Grandma (GM) through a negative observation that is 'epistemologically cautious' (Heritage 1997), since Teacher tells only what he has observed to be fact from his point of view (Pomerantz 1980) as the collector of student work (Teacher does NOT assert what might be logically inferable: that the student is not DOING any work). Teacher's precision pays off: after Grandma nods at line 3, displaying her prior knowledge of this student-trouble (Pillet-Shore 2015a), she parlays the implicit distinction between the student's DOING his work versus TURNING IT IN to Teacher at line 5. With her *and*-preface, Grandma positions her utterance as (not only an agreement but) an upgrade on the severity of the problem that Teacher just articulated. Responding to this uptake by Grandma starting at line 6, Teacher shifts from the focal student's case by invoking 'a couple kids who have' that same trouble.

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(10) [01]
1 T: Pro:blem (0.2) is:: (.) >thet he's not
2 (turning/turned in) any work.<
3 (0.5)/((GM nodding))
4 T: [And that's-
5 GM: [And thuh wors:e thing is he's do:ing it.
6 T: Is- okay, **>cause I'fve had a couple kids who have and**
7 **thuh parents are tellin me,< .hh (0.2) [I'fve=**
8 GM: [We've-
9 T: **=see 'im doin thuh work? an (0.3)**
10 GM: (It happens-/Am hav[ing-)
11 T: **[ih- it kills me thet (.) he's not**
12 **getting °credit for it°.**

At line 6, Teacher accepts Grandma's preceding response and then rushes to deliver an utterance that he formulates (with '>cause') as an account, invoking 'a couple kids who have' the same trouble. Teacher then quotes 'thuh parents' of those other kids (lines 7 and 9) to affirm Grandma's preceding claim.[7] Over the course of this sequence, Teacher situates both the focal student alongside his other students who have exhibited this trouble, and his current addressed-recipient Grandma alongside these other students' parents, thereby constituting the student-trouble as more common and thus not unique to the focal student or Grandma.

Teachers invoking student categories

A second, less explicit way teachers routinize student-troubles is by invoking the focal student's membership in a particular social category (cf. Sacks 1972; Schegloff 2007b). Teachers use these *membership categorization devices* as accounts (Sacks 1972), explaining/excusing the student's trouble by positioning it as a normal, expectable characteristic of category members. Excerpts (11) and (12) both exemplify this phenomenon,[8] with (11) showing a sequence initiated by a teacher, and (12) showing a sequence initiated by a parent/caregiver.

Leading up to line 1 in (11), Teacher has delivered a series of praising assessments of the first-grade student's academic performance[9] as she and Mom gaze down at the student's grades on the mid-year (December) report card. This report card uses numerical grades, 1 through 4, with 4 being best. The student has earned all 4s with the exception of the one 3 (assessing one aspect of the student's in-class behavior) to which Teacher starts pointing at line 1. Mom's gaze follows Teacher's pointing gesture, and at line 2 Mom says, 'She tAlks' in overlap with Teacher's 'Thee only°', timed so her articulation of this student-criticism (accounting for that one 3 grade) comes one beat BEFORE Teacher herself, for the first time, explicitly mentions that 'three' grade. The timing of Mom's delivery of 'She tAlks' enables Teacher to subsequently agree with her ('↑Yea:h') at

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line 3 (Pillet-Shore 2015a), and then deliver her own downgraded reformulation of it (lines 3–4). At line 5 as Mom agrees with Teacher and then laughs—using her laughter to invite Teacher to also laugh (Jefferson 1979)—Teacher declines Mom's invitation to laugh so she can shift from the focal student by invoking the student's membership in a larger category of persons—the social category of age ('She's six').

(11) [10b]
1 T: Th[ee only° three, manages=
2 M: [She tAlks. ((M and T gazing at report card))
3 T: =>class ti(m)e-?< .hh *↑Yea:h, >She gets a little
4 chat[ty¿ ((*M and T in mutual gaze))
5 M: [Yeahhh [hih hih hih hih shih
6 T: [Yih know,
7 T: **She's six. She can do that¿**

By explicitly invoking the focal student's age at line 7, Teacher mobilizes the category 'six-year-olds' as a license and normalizing account for the student's criticizable conduct, positioning her talkative/chatty behavior as simply an expectable product of her age.

Excerpt (12) shows the opening of the conference encounter between Teacher and the fourth-grade student's legal guardian Grandma (GM). At lines 1–2, Grandma introduces herself to Teacher as she walks into the room. In her very next utterance at line 4, Grandma embeds a characterization of the student as a 'messy little bee', hearable as both a (gender neutral) term of endearment for, and criticism of, her grandson. After Teacher produces two countervailing characterizations of the student (at lines 5 and 9), Grandma returns to her grandson's messiness at line 11, claiming persistent though unsuccessful efforts to remedy this student-trouble. At line 13, Grandma converts her student-criticism into a complaint with her vocalized out-breath ('uohhhh!'; Pillet-Shore 2015b). In response, Teacher shifts away from the focal student by invoking his gender.

(12) [07b]
1 GM: I'm Sally Ann McFarland.I'm: yeah Tony's
2 grandma.
3 T: Why hello:.Welcome,Come on i:n,
4 GM: nhhhhh You have my les- messy little bee.hhhh!
5 T: Oh he's: (0.4) he's a good guy.
6 M: He- He's (a/uh) s- th[u- >one a thuh sweetest kids=
7 T: [He's-
8 GM: =there ever was but<[.hh
9 T: [He is <so sweet at hea:rt,>
10 (0.4)

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11	GM:	Fer years I've tr(h)ied tih get him tih get ne:ater.
12	T:	mpt! Yeah. He's-=
13	GM:	=<A:n' it just uohhhh!> [°I dunno,°
14	T:	[**Typical bo:y?**
15	GM:	.hhh
16		(.)
17	T:	[**(A guy thing¿)**
18	GM:	[I've always thought- Well I've always thought boys
19		could be neat too.B(hh!)uh I gue(hh!)ss no(h)thhh.

Teacher's utterances at lines 14 and 17 activate the student's gender as a normalizing account for his messiness, positioning this student-trouble as an expectable product of his membership in this larger category of persons.

Teachers likening themselves to students

A third way teachers routinize student-troubles is by likening themselves to the focal student in terms of the salient trouble. Teachers do this action adjacent and subsequent to their own and/or parents' articulation of the criticizable referent, claiming to share that referent in common with the student. Teachers thereby claim *particularistic comembership* (cf. Erickson & Shultz 1982) with the nonpresent student, transforming the preceding STUDENT-criticizing action into an action that is also SELF-criticizing/SELF-deprecating. In so doing, teachers enact a strong display of affiliation with the student and minimize the significance/seriousness of the student-trouble. Excerpts (13) and (14) both exemplify this phenomenon, with (13) showing a teacher to do this just after she articulates the student-trouble, and (14) showing a teacher to do this just after the student's parents articulate the student-trouble.

Occurring toward the end of the conference encounter, (13) involves the focal kindergarten student's Dad (D), homeroom teacher (T1), and math specialist teacher (T2). When T2 arrived about twenty minutes into T1 and Dad's already in-progress interaction, she noted that the student is 'easily distracted' and 'very social', but then moved onto recommending math activities that Dad can do with the student at home. The start of (13) shows T2 moving to close her math presentation to Dad by delivering a praising summary assessment of the student. At lines 1 and 3–4, Dad offers an upshot of T2's preceding talk. After confirming Dad's upshot at lines 5 and 7 (and after T1 rejoins the talk at line 9 to extend it to all subjects), T2 returns to her single student-criticism at lines 10–12. Immediately after articulating this student-criticism, T2 says 'but' and shrugs her shoulders (see excerpt (8), lines 10–11 for a similar action pattern), embodying her stance toward this student-trouble as of little significance. At line 15, T2 continues her in-progress utterance by shifting from the student to HERSELF, likening herself to him in terms of this specific student-trouble.

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(13) [35]
1 D: So: um: (.)
2 T2: Very good [student.
3 D: [He is:: (.) at least at or above <where
4 he> should be=
5 T2: =Absolutely. ((T2 nodding))
6 D: °Ok[ay°
7 T2: [Yeah
8 D: °(Wa[nted to make s:ure,)°
9 T1: [In all areas.=[((clap)) hih huh
10 T2: [Right,=An' thee only th-
11 T2: Thee only thing- as I say thih- he can be
12 [distracted and he's very social but (0.5)/((T2 shrugs))
13 T1: [((T1 clears throat))
14 T1: An' fer [me: jus' so you kno:w what hhh huh heh heh
15 T2: **[I TALKED my way through schoo:l s(h)ohhh**
16 T1: **£I know I [did too.**
17 T2: **[hih hh Yih hih!**

At line 15, T2 delivers an announcement/admission with a turn-final 'so' that projects an unstated upshot (Raymond 2004)—namely that this student-trouble is of little importance. T2 also produces laugh particles, inviting her recipient(s) to respond (Jefferson 1979). T1 accepts this invitation at line 16 by smiling as she delivers an empathetic receipt, claiming independent agreement as well as first-hand access to the experience of being a social student/child. Through T2's actions at lines 15 and 17, she claims comembership with the student in terms of his criticizable talkativeness, transforming her preceding STUDENT-criticizing action into one that also SELF-criticizes. By stating that they share this criticizable quality with the student, T2 and T1 enact a strong display of affiliation with him and minimize the significance/seriousness of this trouble.

Finally, in excerpt (14), Dad articulates a criticism of his fourth-grade son to Teacher at lines 1 and 3, accounting for why the student takes a long time to do his homework. With her actions at lines 2 and 6–7, Mom seconds Dad's prior criticizing characterization and enactment. Although Dad smiles and laughs during this sequence (at lines 5 and 9), thereby reducing the seriousness of this student-trouble, he and Mom proffer embodied performances of the student 'being distracted' (at lines 3 and 7) for Teacher. In overlap with Mom's enactment at line 7, Teacher shifts from the student to herself at line 8, likening herself to him in terms of this specific student-trouble.

(14) [05]
1 D: He doesn't have enough concentra[tion.He=
2 M: [Yeah.
3 D: =like (un), (0.4)/((D mimes child looking distracted))

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4 T: mpt! Oh_ ((T smiling, nodding))
5 D: [hhhhhhh! hih hih hih .hhh!
6 M: [He doesn't have enough concentra- Yeah.
7 M: H[e <just likes to watch tha:t> ((M does looking around))
8 T: **[£I'm that way <som:etim:es¿> hhhah!**
9 D: huh huh hh
10 M: Yeah.

At line 8, Teacher announces/admits that she shares the criticizable quality with the student, using the indexical expression 'that way' to refer back to Dad and Mom's preceding formulations and enactments of his lack of concentration. Through this action, Teacher claims comembership with the student in terms of the criticizable referent, thereby enacting a strong display of affiliation with him and minimizing the significance/seriousness of this student-trouble.

This section has demonstrated that, in the sequence immediately following a conference participant's articulation of a student-trouble, teachers regularly *routinize* that trouble, situating the focal student within a larger social category of like others. Teachers' action of invoking other cases of the focal student's trouble requires an organizational overview perspective that is afforded by an asymmetrical property of these parent-teacher conference interactions. For parents/caregivers who only have epistemic and experiential access to their own children/family, the focal child's trouble is a particular circumstance—unique and personal. In contrast, teachers have epistemic and experiential access to all of their past and current students, enabling the focal child's trouble to be one case among multiple cases that fit within a larger pattern. Though previous literature suggests that this asymmetry—constituting the difference between teacher and parent perspectives—may ENGENDER tension and conflict between interactants (Waller 1932; Drew & Heritage 1992:50–51), the foregoing analysis demonstrates the counterintuitive finding that teachers can parlay this asymmetry to FORESTALL tension and conflict. When teachers position the student's trouble as more common and thus as not unique to the focal student and her/his parent/caregiver(s),[10] they thereby defuse and diffuse the toxicity of the student-criticism. Thus, teachers can use the action of *routinizing* student-troubles to mitigate and/or account for the focal student's trouble, working to maintain solidarity with that student and his/her parent/caregiver(s).

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Analyzing video-recorded naturally occurring parent-teacher conference interactions, this article has demonstrated that teachers design their student-evaluating utterances differently in systematic ways that are observably sensitive to the valence—the positive or negative charge—of the evaluation. Whereas teachers produce their student-PRAISING utterances fluently, straightforwardly, and with an

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active grammatical construction that incorporates explicit reference to the student as the responsible agent—thereby treating their articulation of student-triumphs as *preferred*, they produce their student-CRITICIZING utterances nonfluently, non-straightforwardly, and with a grammatical construction that omits explicit reference to the student – thereby treating their articulation of student-troubles as *dispreferred*. These findings perfectly complement previous works by Pillet-Shore (2012, 2015a), which elucidate a corresponding inverse preference organization for parents: whereas parents criticize their own children fluently and straightforwardly, treating their articulation of student-criticism as preferred, they systematically work to avoid praising their children, treating their articulation of student-praise as dispreferred (see Table 1). Together, these studies document the discovery of a holistic preference organization operative during parent-teacher encounters, thereby extending conversation analytic work on the preference structures of interaction (e.g. Heritage 1984; Schegloff 2007a). Furthermore, this article advances this literature by: (i) contributing to our knowledge about the comparatively understudied preference organization of sequence-INITIATING actions (cf. Robinson & Bolden 2010; Pillet-Shore 2011), and (ii) explicating how speakers can design their utterances to be hearably dis/preferred at the additional analytic levels of prosody (fluent versus nonfluent speech), person reference (inclusion versus omission of explicit person reference), and grammar (active versus passive or ergative construction), extending extant definitions of dis/preferred formats.

In addition, this article 'drilled down' on teachers' conduct during student-criticizing sequences to elucidate two specific actions—*obfuscating responsibility* for, and *routinizing*, student-troubles—that teachers use to accomplish the generic properties of dispreferred turn/sequence construction (i.e. delays, qualifications/mitigations, and accounts). By obfuscating responsibility for student-troubles, omitting explicit reference to the student, teachers work to NOT explicitly assign responsibility for the student's trouble to the student her/himself. And by routinizing student-troubles, shifting from the focal student's case to other cases of that same trouble, teachers position the student's trouble as more common and thus as not unique to the student and his/her parent/caregiver(s), thus defusing and diffusing the toxicity of the student-criticism. At its core, research on *preference* identifies ways in which the design of actions can contribute to the maintenance of bonds of social solidarity between people (Heritage 1984:265). This article shows how teachers carefully design their student-criticizing actions to maintain solidarity with students and thus their parents, thereby forestalling conflict.

Previous work shows that parent-teacher conference participants treat parents and their children (the students) as incumbents of a single party, such that praising/criticizing the student is often tantamount to praising/criticizing her/his parent. Pillet-Shore (2012) demonstrates that participants treat utterances that praise nonpresent students as implicating praise of parents: parents respond to teachers' student-praising utterances as compliments; and parents work to avoid articulating student-praising utterances, thereby avoiding implications of self-praise.

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Correlatively, Pillet-Shore (2015a) observes that parents and teachers tacitly collaborate to enable parents to articulate student-criticisms before teachers, demonstrating a specific manifestation of the more general preference for the person responsible for a negatively valued referent to be first to call attention to it (Pillet-Shore 2015c; cf. Schegloff 2007a). The present article's findings extend this past work. Through their extra work during student-criticizing sequences to obfuscate responsibility for, and routinize student-troubles, teachers display their orientation to their student-criticizing utterances as face-threatening to both parent and child, jeopardizing their conjoint *positive face* (by displaying disapproval of the criticizable referent) and *negative face* (e.g. by obliging the parent to help the student improve). This article also shows that, when teachers criticize students, they display unease about what they are saying, treating this action as difficult to perform. The act of criticizing the student threatens the teacher's negative face (constituting the imposition of doing something unpleasant) and her/his positive face (by inviting potential dislike and negative judgments from parents).

An unfortunate limitation of previous CA work on troubles-talk/troubles-telling (e.g. Jefferson 1988) is that it conflates the action of *criticizing* with the action of *complaining* (e.g. Heinemann & Traverso 2009). Though both are ways of 'finding fault' with someone/something, they require analytic disentanglement since participants to interaction display investment in discerning them. On the one hand, to complain is to 'express suffering or discontentedness as a result of experiencing some trouble' (Pillet-Shore 2015b). By complaining, a speaker implies or states that someone or something has hurt and/or wronged him/her (cf. Tracy, van Dusen, & Robinson 1987:56). On the other hand, as we have seen in this article, to criticize is to negatively evaluate a person for some act or quality for which that person is deemed responsible (Tracy et al. 1987). Empirically it is clear that a speaker can criticize WITHOUT complaining—without implicating the speaker's own suffering or grievance.[11] The distinction between these two social actions is critical, not only for conversation analysts who term this the *action ascription* problem, but first and foremost for interactional coparticipants who (must) have some consistent way(s) of designing and recognizing an utterance as a criticism (and NOT a complaint).

This article shows that teachers exercise great care in designing their negative student-evaluations so they are recognizable to parents as criticisms and NOT complaints. While teachers have an institutional right and responsibility to criticize their students, they should not appear to be complaining about their students, as doing so would make what should be a professional and standardized/objective student-evaluation into a personal and conversational/subjective evaluation—clear grounds for subsequent parental complaint and the emergence of conflict. Indeed, teachers' use of the two specific actions uncovered in this article—*obfuscating responsibility* for, and *routinizing*, student-troubles—helps to impersonalize their student-criticizing utterances, thus making them less vulnerable to being (mis)understood as complaints.

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APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPT CONVENTIONS

[	onset of overlapping talk
=	utterances that are latched together, with no gap of silence between them
-	preceding sound is cut off
:.	pitch turns downward within the word
:'	pitch turns upward within the word
(0.4)	Timed silence measured in seconds and tenths of seconds
(.)	A micropause of less than 0.2-second
:	preceding sound is stretched
.	falling intonation
,	continuing or slightly rising intonation
?	rising intonation
¿	intonation between continuing and rising
underline	emphasis or increased volume relative to surrounding talk
°I dunno°	decreased volume relative to surrounding talk
!	preceding sound is abruptly punctuated
↑ ↓	sharp rise or fall in pitch
>fast<	increased pace of talk relative to surrounding talk
<slow>	decreased pace of talk relative to surrounding talk
#	scratchy voice
£	smile voice
~	shaky voice
.hh	in-breath; the more 'h's the longer the in-breath
hh	out-breath (sometimes indicating laughter); the more 'h's the longer the out-breath
hah hih	beat(s) of laughter
( )	transcriber doubt about talk
(( ))	scenic detail not easily transcribed
*	onset of visible conduct subsequently described inside double parentheses
^	onset of second type of visible conduct within a single line of transcript
bold	target utterance(s)

NOTES

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[1]See the appendix for transcript conventions based upon the system developed by Gail Jefferson.

[2]This article refers to caregivers as Grandma (GM), Mom (M), and Dad (D) because these are the person reference formulations the coparticipants themselves use.

[3]Teacher appears to use the 0.3-second silence at line 18, and sound cut-off plus silence at line 19, as phrasal breaks (Goodwin 1979) that request Grandma's return gaze. Once Teacher enters mutual gaze with Grandma at line 19, she produces her student-praising turn-constructional units (or TCUs; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson 1974) fluently.

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[4]Teachers tend to prioritize student-praise and delay student-criticism, a phenomenon that may be analogous to Maynard's (2003) observation that good news tends to be forwarded while bad news is delayed.

[5]Dichotomizing KNOWING versus SHOWING—by disaggregating potential versus actual student performance—is another action teachers regularly perform during student-criticizing sequences, as exemplified by excerpts (5) and (6) (Pillet-Shore 2014).

[6]*Routinizing* is the term that most accurately describes teachers' action of constituting the focal student's trouble as more routine/nonunique across ALL of the cases in my data set. While some cases show teachers to also be normalizing and/or minimizing the student-trouble through these utterances (e.g. excerpt 9), in other cases teachers are NOT normalizing or minimizing the student-trouble through these utterances (e.g. excerpt 10). *Routinizing* is thus the term most analytically warranted by data.

[7]It is, however, (perhaps designedly) unclear whether the next portion of Teacher's utterance (at lines 11–12) is Teacher continuing his quoting of 'thuh parents', or instead shifting his footing (Goffman 1981) such that he is now the animator, author, and principal of this talk.

[8]Excerpt (8) (line 13) also shows Teacher to deploy the category 'seventh £gra:de' as a normalizing account for the student's trouble of being a bit too social/talkative in class. Whereas (8) shows a teacher doing this action after articulating the student-criticism, (11) and (12) show teachers doing this action after parents/caregivers are first to articulate the student-criticism.

[9]Excerpt (4) shows this same Teacher delivering one such praising assessment moments before the start of (11).

[10]This is one way teachers display and enact their epistemic and cultural authority: because they have greater expertise (based on their past experience with and knowledge about cases 'like this'), they have greater rights to 'name the world' (cf. Starr 1982).

[11]This is the essence of the common expression 'offering constructive criticism'; and note that one can criticize oneself as through self-deprecation, but one cannot complain about oneself.

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