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Parent--teacher meetings as a unit of analysis for parent--teacher interactions

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Abstract

The attempt to establish the decisive factors in psychological research, from an idiographic perspective, firstly involves examining the meanings entailed in this epistemological paradigm. Specifically, our work sets out to assess the possibilities of using this perspective with reference to parent--teacher relationships, as expressed through parent--teacher meetings.

Said meetings present their own specific features which distinguish them from all the other kinds of meetings examined in literature (clinical, orientational, educational). Since many studies on this subject (parent--teacher communications; parent--teacher meetings, parent--teacher relationships) have focused mostly on the conversational aspects, it seemed time for a deeper theoretical and methodological examination of the specific characteristics of this instrument. Parent--teacher meetings have some particular features that make them a possible subject of idiographic analysis: firstly, it is a phenomenon that occurs at the dynamic meeting point between the life experiences of different individuals, brought together by their shared focus on the same matter of interest.

Here we intend to describe, from a theoretical point of view, parent--teacher meetings as a relevant object of study and a possible context for future interventions.

Keywords

Parent--teacher cooperation, parent--teacher relationships, parent--teacher meetings, idiographic approach, methodology

The idiographic perspective in psychology

The intent to define from an epistemological and methodological standpoint the determinants for a psychological research in accordance with an idiographic perspective requires first of all a comparison of the meanings that are intended to be included in this paradigm. The cultural and narrative changes that have characterised psychological studies in the last decades have suggested the adoption of methodological approaches not strictly based on an empirical logic of inductive generalisation which is proper to a nomothetic outlook.

This is a fundamental component of the debate that has originated from the very foundation of psychological science, on the basis of the initial distinction proposed by Windelband (1904) between nomothetic and idiographic disciplines; it is good to remember that such a demarcation, as formulated, in reality did not intend to define the diversity in approaches in question on an oppositional basis but instead on a dynamic and complimentary one. Historically, the distinction proposed by Windelband has its roots in German 19th Century thought in which we may observe an increasing clarification and at the same time a stiffening of the demarcation between Natural Sciences and the Sciences 'Of The Spirit'. Confined in a debate between Materialists and Idealists, Psychology immediately placed itself between the two extremes assuming thereby a fundamental ambiguity in the definition of its objective and its method. If in fact the object of study in Psychology could be amenable to the dominion of the Sciences Of The Spirit (*Geist*, in German), the methods should have been characterised in accordance with nomothetic criteria so as to allow the desirable generalisation of the

results obtained (Mos, 1998). In other terms, from the very beginning Psychology received a potentially hybrid and confused connotation with respect to the fundamental epistemological dimensions considered.

The idiographic perspective and developmental psychology

It is good therefore to contextualise our analysis in relation to the two aspects that have characterised Psychology's internal epistemological debate during the past twenty years, the cultural-narrative turn, observed above all in the area of Developmental Psychology, and the studies on the possibility of generalising the results obtained starting with field-dependent data. As to the first phenomenon, it is interesting to underline how, during the last decades, there has been a notably increased trend to direct the studies conducted in the field of Developmental Psychology towards the adoption of qualitative methodologies and an emic orientation. It is well worth to mention how the first attempt in that direction was made by M. Cole (1996) in response to the limits encountered in the renowned study of the Kpelle tribe in Liberia. The adoption of quantitative methodologies, strongly characterised by cultural biases, forced the researchers to redefine the methodological framework suggesting the use of instruments more open to spot the peculiarities of the social and cultural contexts shared by the participants in the study. The afore-mentioned turn in the cultural and narrative senses soon impacted on the work of other authors of the Developmental Psychology area, thereby contributing to the development of a sector properly defined as Cultural, different by its' trans-cultural orientation and more open to the application of methodologies of a quantitative and ethical nature.

On the possibility of generalising the results obtained from field-dependent data

Regarding the second above-mentioned phenomenon (i.e., the possibility of generalising the results obtained starting from field-dependent data), it is good to stress how said aspect can be ascribed to two factors. The first factor regards the complexity with which Psychology may be defined in relation to the two heuristic and complimentary poles (nomothetic vs. idiographic approaches). The second factor refers to the scientific need to evaluate not only the modes attributable to individually ordered variables but also the characteristics of context-dependent variables (e.g., family, society, culture). Taking into account context-related aspects, i.e. elements bound to the peculiarities of the phenomena investigated, sends us back to the problem of the generalisability of the results. In other terms, the definition of an idiographic approach in Psychology must start with the clarification of the relationship between generalisation (of the results obtained in universal laws) and uniqueness (of the systems studied). Following Salvatore's theories, the comparison between these options should not necessarily be understood in oppositional terms but rather as an intrinsic function of a wider process of sense and meaning attribution (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010). Embracing this perspective, it is then possible to consider an idiographic orientation not only in terms of a rejection of the methods of nomothetic knowledge (Allport, 1966; Valsiner, 2014), but as a declination particular to it, centred more on the singular and unique aspects of the observed phenomena. According to this perspective, the idiographic approach qualifies itself in relation to a nomothetical one, not as much for an axiomatic refusal of the options oriented to the construction of a knowledge conducted by 'accumulation' of statistical evidence, but instead as an overcoming, theoretic and

methodological, of the radicalisation of said perspective based, in fact, on inductive generalisation. The epistemological option, supported herein, is one of an idiographic science able to propose an alternative model of knowledge production, that is to say, a model of an ab-ductive nature. The characterisation of contemporary Psychology as a nomothetical science has been made possible on the basis of a shared attribution of values, on the basis of which we have managed to acknowledge the attribute of 'generality' and 'Science' to the inductive process, which is based on a logic of data accumulation. The axiomatisation of the nomothetical model has therefore lead, at least in Psychological Science, to a reductive interpretation of the same model we have mentioned before (Gastaldi, Longobardi, Pasta, & Sclavo, 2011; Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner 2014). It has furthermore contributed to counterpose case studies to research characterised by an analysis of variables, conducted in accordance to quantitative perspective, allowing the generalisation of results.

This counter position has contributed, from a social and cultural viewpoint, to the structuring of strongly normative stereotypes about the characterisation of 'Science' attributed to contemporary Psychology. According to this perspective, the nomothetical attribute should be applied not only on the basis of the intent (i.e., the generalisation of results) pursued by the conducted study, but also as a function of the adoption of a rigidly described and applied methodological apparatus as a precise repertory of techniques, instruments and analyses. The crystallisation of the methodological debate in social practices implies a risk of a further legitimisation of the empiricist approach (Matusov, 2008; Toomela, 2009), with the implicit devaluation of any alternative perspective.

On new definitions of idiographic sciences

Placing our reflection in the context of said critique, we intend to articulate the proposal of a possible subject of an idiographic inquiry as the communicative and relational instrument of the parent--teacher meetings in view of the particular characteristics that specify it. In accordance with what Salvatore and Valsiner (2010) express, to substantiate a complimentary nature of nomothetical and idiographic approaches it is necessary, in the first place, to epistemologically redefine what may be intended today as Idiographic Science. The authors suggest referring the characteristics of such methodological perspective to three orders of factors: (a) The ontological definition of the object of study; (b) The epistemological anchorage derived from the definition; (c) The specification of the methodological strategies and techniques for analysis. In merit to the first order of factors, the authors stress the unique character of Psychological phenomena as a fundamental ontological presupposition. Every specific case, object of psychological study, presents itself as a particular self-evident content and generates, from diachronic and synchronic integration with other examples of self-evident content, additional finite sets of occurrences. Uniqueness is here given as an intrinsic characteristic to the nature of the surveyed object, and as the implicit trait of the contextual contingencies in which the subjects are analysed. Uniqueness is therefore understood as a constituent component of the object of psychological knowledge in accordance with a double meaning, as its essential trait and as a derivative of the fact that said object expresses itself necessarily per field-dependent modalities (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010). Regarding the second aspect, uniqueness of the subject entails the difficulty to aggregate, in a generalised manner, the objects in classes of superior order,

dependent upon the particular similarities. From a methodological viewpoint such an assumption entails the waiver to consider the subject population as a cognitive instrument (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010), limiting thereby the confusion between the diverse levels of analysis, i.e., related to the individual vs. referred to the population) (cf. Lamiell, 1998). The third aspect, finally, leads to the adoption of an abductive way of generalisation capable of both reducing the limits brought about by the application of inductive generalisation strategies and its overcoming consequent bond to the generalisability of the results obtained through idiographic methods of research. In this view, the idiographic approach can involve a combination of the case study method (e.g., Scholz & Tietje, 2002) and the statistical time series analysis.' (Molenaar & Valsiner, 2008, p. 26). The adhesion to the idiographic approach in Psychology would therefore stem from the consideration of psychological phenomena in their uniqueness and dynamic and systemic nature without this implying an aprioristic renunciation to the generalisation of the results (Valsiner, 2014).

The abductive approach as a method of generalization

The authors suggest the possibility of orienting towards a methodological approach defined as abductive and attain generalisation through a process of modelling single phenomena, reaching non-definitive conclusions and not of an inferential character. Such conclusions are expressed therefore as potential new hypotheses allowing the advancement of the study of the object of knowledge via successive approximations. A similar concept of idiographic science implies the possibility of extending this reflection to the study of any other type of psychological phenomena

without limiting the methodological analysis, per aprioristic logic, to specific classes of psychological objects. Furthermore, the vision of the idiographic approach entails a diverse method of considering the relationships, with respect to the nomothetic approach, not in the terms of contraposition and competition, but rather a reciprocal inclusive and dialectic manner (Valsiner, 2007, 2014). The comparison between these two perspectives, the authors suggest, must progress past the classic methodological contrapositions oriented towards a rigid dichotomisation of the approaches (i.e., quantitative vs. qualitative, ethical vs. emic, etc.), comprising innovative research strategies characterised by the simultaneous use of qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Salvatore, Valsiner, Travers, & Gennaro, 2010). The validation of knowledge production strategies would be realised, thereby, thanks to the overcoming of the myth itself of nomothetic knowledge. In this sense, an abductive method of generalisation could validate such strategies as processes of effective construction of knowledge through modelling performed on single cases as a base for subsequent generalisation.

The idiographic perspective as a possibility to deepen educational processes

Such renewed attention reflects further upon the study and deepening of the processes of an educative order for the intrinsic uniqueness to the growth trajectories achieved in themselves, and with a specific reference to the frameworks (of a relational, social, and cultural order) that encode their manifestation. It then becomes possible to deepen the inquiry in characteristic contexts of interaction of the educative relationship (especially in the scholastic context), also confronting the study of those interactive

contexts until now relatively neglected in literature, such as parent--teacher meetings. It is indeed apparent that many studies on said phenomenon have above all else concentrated on aspects of conversational order with a reference to the hierarchic differential of power expressed on the part of the teacher. Although the parent--teacher meeting is generally recognised as a fundamental moment of the scholastic experience, the literature in fact witnesses a general scarcity of studies on the argument as confirmed by Minke and Anderson (2003). The greater part of the studies conducted aim themselves mostly towards the analysis of this interaction from a communicative standpoint. The studies that seek instead to analyse the semiotic and affective dynamics are rare.

Parent--teacher meetings in the Italian context

As specified by Lemmer (2012), regular school--family confrontations are necessary to achieve a positive involvement of the parents (Evans, 2004; Graham-Gray, 2002), and give place to a form of open 'two way' communication having the child as the common object of interest.

Italian Educational Law has established the obligation of organising periodical parent--teacher meetings for the purpose of discussing children's scholastic improvement on a regular basis, and to inform parents of any difficulties that may have been encountered recently, in regards to scholastic performance and the quality of pupils' relationships with teachers and peers. The necessity of a constant and close cooperation between families and schools is enshrined by article 29/2 of the National Collective Contract for Teachers (2006/2009), which states: 'Individual obligations

include such activities as: (...) c) individual relations with families.' Since the birth of Collegial Orders (1997) there has been an increased tendency to view schools as a sort of 'Participated context' together with families and the Community. Parent--teacher meetings constitute a vital moment for the creation of an effective interaction between these two 'formative agencies' (i.e., school and family). From a historical point of view, the academic obligation to organise regular meetings with families was defined in an age that brought about stronger parent involvement policies in school practices. This phase needs was related to with instances of democratization that had become increasingly common since the 1970s. Current norms leave it up to the single schools to define the number and nature of interactions with families during the school year. Usually, meetings precede the presentation of the mid-term and final report cards of about two months. Parents of primary school children have several guaranteed opportunities for meeting with teachers (a minimum of eight during the whole school year, including report card presentation), to which a number of additions can be made, depending on the eventual difficulties that may have been encountered during the school year, and that can be proposed freely by both teachers and parents. From a psycho-pedagogical point of view, Parent--Teacher meetings have a remarkable importance in the Italian setting, having been structured into a highly sanctioned situation, from a cultural point of view. Usually, the meetings are scheduled outside of school hours, in a highly private environment (i.e., the staff room or another space, used exclusively for conducting meetings at that moment), and they entail the exclusive involvement of adults, i.e., the parents and the curricular teachers (with a preferential status for teachers of language and logical-mathematic subjects). Although these meetings are established

by law and many ministerial recommendations have been issued, no guidelines have yet been given by official organs in the Italian setting; therefore, all interaction, from a communicative point of view, is completely left up to the personal attitudes and choices of teachers. Thus, it is clear that, despite the concrete and acknowledged importance of such moments, teachers might easily encounter a number of difficulties in the management of such a particular communicational situation. It was therefore possible to hypothesize the validity of this approach in the Italian context, where this type of interaction is particularly frequent and typical; however, this does not exclude the applicability of such approach in other contexts.

At an international level, it has been observed that the confirmations regarding the frequent difficulties encountered by teachers in communicating effectively in such a situation are diverse (McEwan, 2005), especially in relation to specific contingencies: e.g., entry in a new teaching context, situations of multi-cultural interaction (Guo, 2010). However, said context constitutes one of the most interesting areas of study, also due to the components of relational and emotional order which it implies; meetings, as a matter of fact, cause a social 'co-construction' of the pupil, that is generated by the contents expressed by both parents and teachers, until then instead represented individually according to family and educational prospects. With our contribution we intend to propose the definition of a new framework for methodological analysis, of a micro-genetic type, that will allow for an effective triangulation of the data for the comprehension of the specific dynamics of that reality.

The heuristic-based question that guides this analysis could therefore be expressed as follows: Is it possible, and in what terms, to describe parent--teacher meetings as an object of idiographic research?

The idiographic study of parent--teacher meetings

Our examination places itself in the context of studies of a constructivist and socio-cultural orientation: particular attention is therefore dedicated to the processes of socio-symbolic mediation of personal and social practices. Said dynamics are considered herein as profoundly inserted and connected to the most comprehensive processes of interpretation and reflection, effected daily by the subjects against the symbolic dimensions of what is real (Valsiner, 2000, 2001, 2008, 2014). These practices, continuously inserted in processes of semiotic negotiations are activated daily within specific formation contexts, generating a continuous and ever changing flow of shared representations relative to the objects of knowledge, the experiences, the environment, and personal future expectations. These representations are 'excited' and express the affective and unconscious substrate of the modes of function of the mind, and they form also in relation to the specific positioning of the subjects in the social and organisational context (Harré & Gillet, 1994; Kullasepp, 2006). It is therefore the discursive practices, inserted in specific contexts of activities, that allow the becoming and manifestation of the dynamics of affective symbolisation (Matte Blanco, 1975).

It is possible to study the context of the parent--teacher meetings by adopting the interpretative criteria typical of ecological models, the first of which was proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986). According to this view, every person acts and

develops inserted within a complex ecological context, generated by the interactions between five subsystems defined as *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *macrosystem*, *exosystem*, and *chronosystem*. By microsystem we mean the set of direct interactions between children and the environments in which they are concretely inserted: first and foremost the family and school. The connections and exchanges between these environments define the mesosystem, a level which allows the interaction between the teacher and the parents of the child (Berk, 2000). These interactions are nonetheless affected by influences exerted by the exosystem, in the form of the supra-personal characteristics of specific contextual systems (e.g., the characteristics of the parents' work environment, or of the scholastic institution attended by the child), with which the subjects do not necessarily structure a direct interaction. The macrosystem, according to an even wider view, refers to the influences exercised by cultural values that characterise the complexity of all systems, on a global social plane. Lastly, the chronosystem defines the effect of the temporal variable. The adoption of the ecological model implies the consideration of parent-teacher meetings in terms of a mesosystem given by the interconnections between the child's family and scholastic reference contexts in which bidirectional communication between these two polarities is achieved.

Epstein (1987) describes, in this regard, the interaction between three 'spheres' or main environments: family, school and community. The child is placed at the centre of these three dimensions as the recipient of the educative mission proposed jointly by the personal contexts of growth. The parent--teacher meetings, as the next diagram illustrates (see Figure 1), is placed from a symbolic viewpoint in an area of interception between the family and scholastic spheres, but considering the plane of the

context of interaction, the meeting situation is primarily activated and encoded according to the representations processed in the scholastic context, be it at the micro level (the reference group or class in which the child's schoolmates and the team of teachers are included) or be it at the macro level (the scholastic institution).

As Iannaccone and Marsico (2013) have precised, family--school interactions imply constant adjustments between the representations that the participants have developed over the same object of interest (or *Topic*, in the words of Conversational Analysis), which is, the pupil. Such representations are confronted in a conversational space that generates the expression of a new Social Space, given by the contact between two different cultural 'worlds': scholastic and familiar. The context of iteration, which implies negotiation, constitutes the symbolic place where the participants' identities may reveal themselves (Iannaccone & Marsico, 2007).

Parent--teacher meetings (PTM) (Quaglia & Longobardi, 2011) constitute a particular context for interaction, which has been, up to now, scarcely analysed from a psychological point of view. The PTM in fact offers agents that belong to other distinct ecological systems (i.e., the School for the teacher, the Family for the parents) the possibility of confronting one another over the same subject of interest, the child. The personal attributions when referring to the common object of study can differ substantially, describing the child as a 'pupil' in one case and as a 'son/daughter' in the other. The PTM is a context generated by professional obligations for the teachers (regular parent--teacher meetings are mandatory per Italian Law) but the specifics of which (of a relational and communicative order) describe it as an important moment in the relationship between teachers and parents that is not limited solely to the

institutional dimension of the scholastic experience. The objective of the PTM is to propose to the parent a different possibility through which they may recognise their own child, not only as a 'son/daughter' but also as a 'pupil'; the main purpose of the PTM is therefore to allow a 'confrontation amidst participants on the knowledge of the pupil' (Quaglia & Longobardi, 2011, p. 12).

(INSERT HERE) **Figure 1. Diagram: The PTM according to the ecological-systemic model.**

The parent--teacher meeting further presents some peculiar characteristics which render it a possible subject of idiographic analysis: in the first place it deals with a phenomenon that occurs at the dynamic intersection between life experiences of diverse individuals brought together by the reference to the same subject of interest (i.e., the pupil, the child, even though, as will be detailed subsequently, not even this identity between the two cited characterisations must be taken for granted). The peculiarity of such analysis framework further regards its intrinsic uniqueness, which in turn is strengthened by the contemporary presence of (at least) three distinct individuals (i.e., teacher, parent, pupil) that make it impossible to offer generalised normative readings on the basis of collective principles, and at the same time, the difficulty in applying the general idiographic model which represents a temporal evolution of the personal variables in terms of the function applied to the person¹ (Valsiner, 2014; Molenaar & Valsiner, 2008).

This study looks therefore towards the objective of defining a psychological intervention useful not so much towards the search for solutions applicable to the

resolution of contingent problems, as much as the definition of conceptual instruments which are adequate to the comprehension of the events and to generate new knowledge. The purpose is therefore to define a framework for research and an operation useful to a comprehension of phenomena shared upon a semiological plane by the agents placed at the centre of this communicative and relational context of interaction.

The parent--teacher meeting presents itself as a situation that is always new and never identical to itself, both from an interpersonal and a temporal point of view, even when it entails the same pupil, although likely he or she will be different (due indeed to the temporal variable) in relation to subsequent conversations.

Why is it necessary to plan an idiographic intervention of this type? This query can be answered by describing in an analytic manner the peculiar characteristics (symbolic and communicative) of this setting, as they emerge from the following diagram.

(INSERT HERE) **Figure 2. The situation of the parent-teacher meetings: communicative and symbolic aspects.**

The diagram proposes a dyadic discursive interaction (accomplished by the two agents 'teacher' and 'parent') in which the symbolization is constructed inter-subjectively and referred to the common object of interest (i.e., the child). The diversity of the social and educative roles of the agents implies however that the personal representations attributed to the very same child may differ notably (Quaglia & Longobardi, 2011): beyond the intrinsic variability derived from the intersubjective

character of the interaction, there is an ulterior source of semiotic variability, that stems however from the diverse characteristics (and duties) that each agent deems more important for the person to whom it refers. If the teacher evaluates children first and overall as a *pupils*, the observed auto-regulation behaviours, the evaluation of the scholastic skills and the respect of assignments given will exert a fundamental role in his or her attributions of meaning. On the contrary, the parent considers the child first of all as *offspring*, with a particular reference to factors of a relational or affective order. The reciprocal socialisation of these two views (defined in the diagram by the labels 'B1' and 'B2') may reveal strong distances between the proposed semiotic representations: the final intent of the hypothesised operation then regards the reduction of said distance, or at least the proposal of new cognitive instruments with which to improve the knowledge that the teacher matures of symbolic reference systems with which the family conveys its own view of the school. The parent-teacher meetings in which a similar operation could take place might thereby offer the teacher interesting elements, inferred from meeting the parent, on the basis of which the educative methodologies could be better adjusted for the pupil. In this sense the 'idiographic' characteristic of this intervention is further underscored: deepening the study of a particular relational context, facilitating a virtuous dynamic of recursive fall-out of the knowledge so produced on the personal representations of the agents involved. In fact the teacher might possess new cognitive instruments through which he or she may comprehend in a more efficient manner, with respect to what is gleaned from the daily scholastic experience, the processes of attribution of meaning activated by the pupil. The latter, which in the diagram provided appears above all in the teacher's role of

symbolic 'attractor', and not in his or her concrete role of 'agent', is characterised by an awareness of events of a 'mediated' type, as he or she is strongly influenced by the symbolic representations elaborated from a familial/parental context. From this perspective, the process of sense-making that the child is constructing is placed in a zone of intermediate symbolisation between the processes of significance attribution carried out by the parents (experienced in an affective and symbolic dimension of a familiar, and thereby emotively 'dense', character) and those activated by the teacher (realised in the scholastic dimension, towards which the emotional investment of the child is influenced by past experiences and parental representations). These two semiotic polarities may be oriented towards a reciprocal accord or distance themselves, proposing somewhat different visions of the scholastic experience and originating a symbolic space that is emotively connoted in terms of conflictuality (cf. with the notion of 'Educational Self', in Iannaccone, Marsico, & Tateo, 2013).

The setting of the parent--teacher meeting, by the characteristics here exposed, generates therefore a singular and unrepeatable field from instance to instance: The application of an *ad hoc* research intervention further facilitates, on a practical level, the study and actuation of psychological interventions calibrated in function of the specific context of the study (it is well to remember, to this end, an interesting fact: very low effect sizes are generally observed for the effectiveness of psychological interventions at school designed on medium-large scale) (Lipsey & Wilson, 1993).

The principal advantage resides, as previously mentioned, in endowing the teacher with new cognitive instruments, whose use may be socialised with the parent.

The aim being, in such a manner, to transform the system being analysed into one in which the agents become more aware of the dynamics that cross through it. This new function generated by the system (of self-awareness) should, in our intents, direct and recalibrate the diverse views of the child towards a greater homogeneity: ideally, a partial fusion of B1 and B2 in a co-negotiated and shared representation of B. It is expected that this transformation of the system, which is generative on the plan of sense-making, may influence the manifestation of further psychological phenomena: a production of sense, which is better shared and co-participated, thus expresses itself on the relational level in a better interaction between teacher and child. This latter aspect exercises an important influence on the variables of a scholastic order. The fundamental claim, to which this case refers, regards the capacity for self-regulation of self-aware systems.

Having recognised the importance of this moment of interaction, which provides unique possibilities of understanding said construct, we hypothesise and auspicate the adoption of a research method that will allow, on one side, to deepen the study of the typical dynamics of parent--teacher interaction and on the repercussions that these might have on the pupils, and that, on the other side, will have a positive effect on the system that we have studied, at least in terms of a higher awareness of the system itself.

If the increased awareness was expressed by an increase in the proximity between the two visions of the child, or at least in the change of view elaborated by the teacher, in the best case, the cognitive process generated by the study could originate a

simultaneous and bi-directional change in the visions of the child by both the parent and the teacher. The expected outcomes should regard at least a change in the teacher's representation and, hopefully, should lead to a change in the parent's vision of the child and in the quality of the parent--teacher relationship.

Self-awareness, as an intrinsic characteristic to the system studied, is here meant with reference to the construct of *reflection* (Montesarchio & Venuleo, 2006; Lislie, 2000), and the dialectic that in this process is realised between the dimensions of knowledge and subjectivity. According to this perspective, the consequences of a professional action (in our case, the intervention of a research psychologist) derive from the relation activated between the symbolic space and the action realised in it.

Conclusions

The possibility of diversifying the methodological perspective that is used to deal with educative processes, gives birth to new approaches that, as stated previously, will allow us to accomplish generality by conducting a modelling process which starts from single phenomenons. The present contribution has the intent of providing a theoretical framework, based on an idiographic perspective, of the particular interaction that takes place between parents and teachers during meetings. Specifically, we have proposed Parent--Teacher Meetings as a specific object of study. The reflective process considers the diversity and the changes as categories that structure the dynamics of growth: the reflective action stimulated in the system generates an internal movement of the production of sense. The processing of sense, achieved via self-reflection, gives life to new forms of self-awareness, in constant affirmation and mutation. When the system

reflects and elaborates new forms of meaning referred to the construction of self-identity, it changes its own position in the semantic space of a personal-intrapsychic type (relative to the individual and self-visions of meaning of the single agents), intersychic (co-negotiated between different agents) and systemic (characterising the setting in its entirety) type. In this sense, the focus of the proposed study (i.e., PT meetings) offers a particularly interesting context of interaction.

The specific reality of the parent-teacher meetings is characterised, as said before, by the interaction, at times conflicting, between the personal representations (of the parent and teacher) of the subject of common interest. It is possible to analyse such reciprocal interactions by also referring to the influences of social and contextual character, that emerge in various measures: The influence exercised by the contextual aspects would not manifest itself according to criteria of direct causation, but in terms of a complex system of reciprocal attractions. The pervasiveness of the visions of meaning conveyed by the belonging to specific social contexts is, on one hand, a receptive plasticity of individual processes of semiotic elaboration; on the other hand, it would thereby depend on the complex equilibrium of forces (in fact, we may interpret these poles, by analogy, as centres of semiotic attraction) that structures itself among the elements under scrutiny.

There are, in these considerations, clear references to temporal dimensions and changes: the dynamics of symbolic production are characterised by ever-new possibilities of change, intrinsically given by the plurality of voices that counter-distinguish them, in constant affirmation. The symbolic content conveyed on a social

level can influence these trajectories in a significant manner by offering the subjects essential instruments with which to adapt to their own context without, however, strictly determining the directions of their development.

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Notes

1. Reference is made to the statistical idiographic model (Molenaar & Valsiner, 2008) described by the function $y_p(t) = F_p[x_p(t), \varepsilon_p(t), t]$, in which the function expressing the evolution of the person over the course of time (F_p) develops in relation to the modality of the independent variables (x_p) and from the other residual influences (ε_p), both subjected to the influence of time.