The Problems with Praise in Parent–Teacher Interaction

Danielle Pillet-Shore

This research advances our understanding of what constitutes “a compliment” and “self-praise” in social interaction. Examining video-recorded naturally occurring parent–teacher conference interactions, this article demonstrates that participants treat utterances that praise nonpresent students as implicating praise of parents: parents respond to teachers’ student-praising utterances as compliments; teachers laugh after they explicitly credit student success to parents, displaying their orientation to these crediting utterances as delicate because they leak teachers’ evaluation of parents based upon students’ performance in school; and parents work to avoid articulating student-praising utterances, thereby avoiding implications of self-praise. This research thus reveals that, rather than affording a mutually enjoyable moment of celebration transparently supportive of social solidarity, the action of praising students occasions interactional problems for conference participants.

Keywords: Compliments; Self-Praise; Preference Organization; Parent–Teacher Conferences; Multimodal Institutional Interaction

Praising another person—for example via compliment, appreciation, or congratulation (Pomerantz, 1978)—tends to be treated by scholars as a transparently supportive act (Goffman, 1971), one that promotes social solidarity, interactional affiliation and relational harmony by satisfying involved participants’ positive “face wants”—the desire to be approved of and liked (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 13). Self-praising, however—for example via brag (Miller, Cooke, Tsang, & Morgan, 1992), acclaim of one’s own accomplishments (Benoit, 1997), or positive self-assessment—is widely regarded as a social transgression that undermines solidarity, since “a raising of the self may imply a lowering of the other” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 39). But during
naturally occurring social interaction, are the actions of praising another and praising oneself in fact dichotomous? This article shows that, in at least one kind of interaction—the parent–teacher conference—they are indeed not mutually exclusive.

Analyzing video-recorded naturally occurring parent–teacher interactions, this article demonstrates that participants treat utterances that praise students as implicating praise of parents. More specifically, this article provides detailed empirical evidence that conference participants treat: (1) teachers’ praise of students as tantamount to compliments of parents; and (2) parents’ praise of students—their own children—as tantamount to self-praise. Although the action of praising students would seem to, a priori, afford a mutually enjoyable moment of celebration transparently supportive of social solidarity, this research reveals that conference participants orient to utterances that praise students as interactionally problematic.

Previous work on praising in interaction is predominantly focused on compliments and compliment responses, following Pomerantz’s (1978) seminal analysis of compliment responses in American English telephone conversation. Pomerantz described compliments as placing recipients into a double bind: on the one hand, a compliment-recipient should design her/his response such that it observes the preference to agree with and accept the prior complimenting/praising assessment. On the other hand, a recipient should also design his/her compliment-response such that it observes the concurrently unsatisfiable preference to avoid self-praise. “Preference” is a conversation analytic term referring to systematic sequential properties of turn and sequence construction through which parties manage courses of action that either promote or undermine social solidarity (Heritage, 1984a; Pillet-Shore, 2011a; Schegloff, 2007). Precisely because these two preferences (to avoid self-praise, and accept and agree with the compliment) are at odds with one another, compliment-recipients are in an interactional bind when producing a response: they must work to design their response so it displays a sensitivity to both of these incompatible constraints.

A substantial body of literature has since developed that examines verbal compliment response behaviors of speakers of specific languages (e.g., Golato, 2002; Yu, 2003), with some of this work comparing verbal compliment response “strategies” used by speakers of different languages (e.g., Lorenzo-Dus, 2001). What is largely lacking in this body of work, however, is analysis of how participants constitute and orient to praising actions in institutional interactions. Also lacking is the naturalistic study of multimodal aspects of praise-delivery and reception: participants’ use of nonverbal resources—including laughter and/or nodding—as well as verbal resources to express and receipt praise. This article starts to fill both of these gaps.

In addition, this research contributes to our understanding of how praising of absent known-in-common persons is done, closely inspecting the details of a heretofore unexamined phenomenon: sequences of parent–teacher interaction in which participants praise focal nonpresent students. Participants do the action of “praising” a student by producing an utterance that reflects favorably on that student. Although both teachers and parents deliver utterances that praise students in this
broad sense of the term, a key discovery demonstrated throughout this article is that there is marked contrast between how they each do so.

When teachers praise students, they recurrently produce a positively valenced assessment (cf. Pomerantz, 1978, 1984) of a student’s academic performance and/or in-class behavior (e.g., “He’s doin’ really well”; “Academically she’s wonderful”). And teachers produce their student-praising utterances as structurally “preferred” social actions (Pillet, 2001). “Preferred” actions are characteristically performed straightforwardly and without delay, whereas actions that are delayed, qualified and/or accounted for are termed “dispreferred” (Heritage, 1984a; Schegloff, 2007). Thus, when teachers praise students, they systematically do so straightforwardly—without delay, qualification, or account.

In contrast, parents treat their praise of students—their own children—as structurally “dispreferred.” Parents observably work to avoid praising students when interacting with teachers. And when they do deliver an utterance that reflects favorably on the student, that utterance usually does not directly assess the student’s academic achievement or behavior, but rather merely mentions a favorable fact about the student (e.g., “Jason has like a 4.0 GPA”; cf. Drew, 1984). Most important, when parents praise students, they systematically delay, qualify, and account for that praise, working to manage how their student-praising utterances are heard and understood by others.

This article exemplifies these findings across two core analytic sections. The first section examines sequences in which teachers praise students, showing that: (1) parents respond to teachers’ student-praising utterances as compliments; and (2) when teachers positively assess students and then explicitly credit that student success to the parent(s), this action engenders laughter, particularly by the teachers themselves. The second core analytic section of this article analyzes sequences in which parents imply or state praise of students, demonstrating that: (3) parents recurrently work to avoid articulating praise about their children, and (4) when they do articulate such praise, parents work to manage how their student-praising utterances are heard and understood by coparticipants.

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 the western United States. In addition to doing ethnographic observation in the schools and in several teachers’ classrooms, I gathered a corpus of 41 video-recorded naturally occurring parent–teacher conference interactions involving fourteen teachers and 61 parents/caregivers discussing students ranging in grade level from preschool through seventh grade. 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. Each
conference occurred as part of the schools’ and teachers’ regular, twice-yearly conference schedule.

I analyzed my data using the methods of conversation analysis, repeatedly examining the video recordings and making detailed transcripts of participants’ actions using the system developed by Gail Jefferson (explicated in Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). The goal of this method is to uncover and document systematic practices through which participants accomplish social actions (Heritage, 1984a; Pillet-Shore, 2011a). Toward this end, I collected every sequence in which at least one conference participant (teacher and/or parent) praises the focal nonpresent student by delivering an utterance that reflects favorably on that student, including positively valenced assessments of, and statements of favorable facts about the student. 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 40 such sequences. I juxtaposed this collection with a collection of sequences in which at least one conference participant criticizes the focal student by delivering an utterance that reflects unfavorably on that student, taking up a negatively valenced stance toward, and treating as a trouble requiring remedy, some issue about that student’s academic performance, behavior and/or effort (see Pillet-Shore, 2011b).

**When Teachers Praise Students**

When assessing students’ academic performance and/or in-class behavior, teachers produce positively valenced, praising assessments as “preferred” actions, whereas they produce negatively valenced, criticizing assessments as “dispreferred” actions (Pillet, 2001; Pillet-Shore, 2011b). Correlatively, parents observably discriminate between these two actions: analysis of parents’ behavior in the immediate interactional environment of teachers’ student assessments reveals that parents treat teachers’ praising assessments differently than they treat teachers’ criticizing assessments.

As Pillet-Shore (2011b) demonstrates, when teachers project delivery of a negatively valenced assessment of the student in a particular area, parents recurrently work to express student trouble(s) in that area first, thereby displaying prior knowledge of that trouble (e.g., see Excerpt 7). In contrast, the present analysis shows that, when teachers deliver a positively valenced assessment of the student, parents recurrently pass the opportunity to produce a full (i.e., lexical, substantive) turn-at-talk, allowing teachers to produce their student-praising utterances composed of multiple turn-constructional units (TCUs).

This section shows how, immediately following teachers’ student-praising utterances, parents systematically pass the opportunity to deliver a full turn-at-talk by producing laugh tokens (cf. Glenn, 2003; Jefferson, 1979), continuers (e.g., vocalizations such as “Mm hm” and head nods in environments other than after yes/no questions; Schegloff, 1982; cf. Stivers, 2008), or by allowing silence to develop. And when parents do deliver a lexical responsive turn, it recurrently takes the form of a sequence-closing acknowledgment token (e.g., “Okay”)—a turn designed to project no further within-sequence talk (Schegloff, 2007). As part of producing such
a token, parents may display that they have undergone a change in state of knowledge (e.g., “Oh okay”; Heritage, 1984b) and/or may deliver an appreciation (e.g., “Thank you”). Through their use of these interactional resources, parents index their orientation to the teacher’s preceding student-praising utterance as a compliment, displaying their sensitivity to the preference to accept and agree with the teacher’s compliment while at the same time avoiding self-praise by avoiding saying anything semantically fitted to the specifics of the teacher’s prior turn (cf. Pomerantz, 1978).

Finding 1: Parents Respond to Teachers’ Student-Praising Utterances as Compliments

Excerpt 1 shows Teacher (T) launching the start of conference business with the focal first grade student’s Mom and Dad.4

Excerpt 1 [21a]

01 T: Well let me begin, an’ I know you: are expecting all of this, =She’s w(onder)ful. She’s like a =
02 T: =mod[el child.I mean she’s jus:t =
03 Mom: [hhhu [hh
04 Dad: [.hhuh [huh huh
05 Mom: [(hhuh huh =
06 T: =so; sweet.An’ such a good (. ) ’helper, an’ ’friend, =
07 T: =an’ (. ) everyth[ing. She’s just wo(nder)ful.
08 (0.3)/(Mom, Dad gazing at T; Mom’s mouth closed; Dad’s
09 mouth slightly open as he does a shallow/rapid head nod))
10 T: *(I know you don’t ex)pect thi = ((T leans toward Dad))
11 Dad: *That’s good to hear.
12 T: *[hear anything diff(h)erent ¿
13 Mom: [huh huh hih [She b(h)etter be:, Nope
14 Dad: £
15 T: [.hhh £ She is, She’s [such a sweethear- An’ she’s so =
16 Mom: [Good.
17 T: =like.hh I’ll jus’ see her someone’l1 say yih know
18 do you have a (pink) pen? = > She’s like < ptch! here you go,
19 You know? like it’s just: (. ) (such–) you
20 know she’s– [you cin te]ll she’s got such a big heart. =
21 Mom: [Mmhmm,
22 T: =Like she just wants thi help (people with) everything.So.
23 Mom: ’Y[eh,
24 T: [.hh (The:n/A:n) (0.4) academically like
25 s[he’s wo(nder)ful.
26 Dad: ["Good…"
27 Mom: [Grei:st.

At lines 1–3, Teacher delivers praising summary assessments of the focal student. By prefacing her delivery of these student-praising utterances with “I know you: are expecting all of this,” Teacher is alluding to (at least) Mom’s regular experience as a volunteer/helper inside Teacher’s class during the school day. Teacher designs her initial assessments of the student (at lines 1–3, 7–9) to require no special knowledge of Teacher’s domain of expertise (e.g., rubrics, scores, grades), thereby providing the relevance of a second assessment from her recipients, inviting Mom and Dad “to coparticipate in praising the referent” (Pomerantz, 1984, pp. 61–62).

At the same time, however, Teacher’s student-praising utterances make relevant another constraint on Mom and Dad’s responsive behavior: Mom and Dad should not
straightforwardly join Teacher in praising the student, lest they appear to be indulging in a form of self-praise. Throughout this sequence (as well as throughout their entire conference), Mom and Dad observably work to specifically avoid delivering a second assessment of their daughter that agrees with Teacher’s initial assessments. Instead, at lines 4 through 6 Mom and Dad both produce laugh tokens. Each of them produces their laughter as a turn-at-talk, hearably passing on the opportunity to take a lexical/substantive turn at that point. But why do Mom and Dad laugh here?

Goffman (1956, pp. 265–266) notes that “compliments, acclaim, and sudden reward may throw the recipient into a state of joyful confusion,” causing recipients to experience “discomfiture” and “embarrassment” which they “will make some effort to conceal” from coparticipants through laughter. And Pomerantz (1978), in an endnote, briefly mentions laugh tokens produced in response to compliments—stating that they are a way of achieving “modesty.” Thus, in Excerpt 1, Mom and Dad each use their laughter to display that Teacher’s prior utterance has momentarily “embarrassed” them, thereby showing themselves to be uncomfortable (i.e., not enjoying nor basking in) receiving Teacher’s praising assessments of their daughter—a critical component of their doing “being modest/humble.” These laugh tokens constitute a “safe” response to Teacher’s student-praising utterances because they allow Mom and Dad to both acknowledge Teacher’s prior talk, and at the same time avoid saying anything semantically fitted to its specifics (cf. Pomerantz, 1978).

At lines 7–9, Teacher continues praising the student, offering two slightly more granular characterizations of the child. She emphasizes each noun in her list (stressing each initial syllable, and also doing a counting off gesture, touching her right index finger to fingers on her left hand for each item on her list), and makes her in-progress utterance into a three-part list by deploying “an’ (.) everything,” a generalized list completer (Jefferson, 1990). Teacher then says, “She’s just wonder-ful!” at line 9, recycling two of the words she used at line 2 and adding “just” as an intensifier to bookend this series of assessments. Teacher thereby projects a clear turn completion point at the end of line 9 so as to engender a response from Mom and Dad. But at line 10, a silence develops—time during which Mom and Dad are both hearably passing an opportunity to produce a responsive turn-at-talk. The video shows that Mom and Dad are both gazing directly at Teacher at this moment—Mom’s mouth is firmly closed; Dad’s mouth is slightly open, and he does a shallow, rapid head nod. Dad deploys his head nod here as a nonverbal continuer (Schegloff, 1982; Stivers, 2008), visibly withholding a fuller vocal/verbal affiliative response and thus allowing Teacher to continue holding the conversational floor.

Hearing and seeing Mom and Dad’s lack of substantive response, Teacher pursues uptake with her next actions. Starting at line 12, Teacher gazes at Dad as she leans in and does a hand gesture toward him. Then, rather than moving on to offer new/additional information about the student, Teacher instead recycles multiple words from her talk at line 1 to show that she is re-completing her praising assessment of the student. This action visibly precipitates Dad’s turn-at-talk at line 13, “That’s good to hear,” a sequence-closing assessment. By using the evidential “hear” in his
formulation (Chafe & Nichols, 1986), Dad is underscoring that he is merely assessing what he has heard in Teacher’s preceding talk—he is not assessing his own child, yielding the rights to do that to Teacher. At line 15, Mom once again laughs, overlapping Teacher’s continuation of her turn. At line 14, Teacher also produces laugh particles, first within her speech (as speech-obscuring laughter not accidentally placed on the word “diff(h)erent”—the one word that implies a delicate, less favorable alternative hypothetical assessment; Lerner, in press; cf. Potter & Hepburn, 2010) and then following the completion of her utterance, both as methods for inviting her recipients to respond (at least with more laughter; Jefferson, 1979; Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987). Mom produces her first full turn-at-talk at line 15 in overlap with Teacher’s post-completion laughter, using her utterance to do a mock strict parent voice (“She b[h]etter be,”), shifting mood or modality away from Teacher’s talk about the student in the present to instead talking about how she normatively should behave on an ongoing basis. After producing a joke → serious “Nope” (Schegloff, 2001), Mom limits herself to producing sequence-closing assessments (“Good.” at line 18, and “Great.” at line 29) and continuers (“Mmhm,” at line 23, and ““Yeah,”” at line 25 which may also very quietly agree with Teacher’s utterance at line 24) throughout the remainder of this sequence, even—and perhaps especially—as Teacher transitions her assessments from being about the student’s behavior to being about her academics (lines 26–27). Likewise, Dad produces one more sequence-closing assessment, a quiet ““Good_”” at line 28. Despite Teacher’s multiple moves to generate sequence expansion with Mom and Dad as coparticipants in the action of praising the student—particularly through her shift to a more granular description of the student’s praiseable conduct at lines 19–22—Mom and Dad consistently move for sequence closure, thereby avoiding delivery of a second praising assessment that agrees with Teacher’s initial assessments of their daughter.

Excerpt 2 comes from a conference interaction between the five-year-old student’s primary teacher (T1), specialist math teacher (T2), and Mom. At line 1, T2 starts bringing her presentation of the student’s math performance to a close, summing up her assessment of his math skills by predicting how he will likely perform on his year-end (June) report card based upon his performance up to this point (this conference occurs in February).

Excerpt 2 [28c]
01 T2: I’m looking a:t (. .) thee: (0.2).hh essential
02 T2: skill re:po:rt (:1; {(*T2 lifts gaze to Mom; nodding as she meets Mom’s gaze)})
03 Mom: Mmhm? ((Mom nodding))
04 T2: Th: he’l yihknow. = he’ll get in writing at thee =
05 T2: end of thee ye:ar, .hh An: I don’t see anything on
06 here that he’s* not going tuh (1.0) tih be very
07 Mom: comforta,ble, {(*T2 lifts gaze to Mom)}
08 T2: Indepen[dently. {(*T2 nodding; Mom and T2 in mutual gaze)}
09 Mom: Oh.O[kay,
10 T2: [Doing. {(*T2 nodding; Mom and T2 in mutual gaze)}
11 Mom: Mm, {(*Mom’s mouth firmly closed)}
12 T2: Independently. {(*T2 nodding)}
13 Mom: [Mm, Mmhm, Mmhm, {(*Mom nodding, mouth closed)}]
At lines 1–2 and 5–9 (and continued with her increments at lines 11 and 13), T2 explicates the evidence she is using to form her projected summary assessment of the student’s math performance, delivering a praising assessment of his performance by negating the presence of problems. At line 10, Mom responds to T2’s assessment by saying “Oh.Okay,” using her “Oh” to register the just-preceding utterance as an informing from which she has gained knowledge (Heritage, 1984b), and her “Okay” to accept T2’s assessment (Schegloff, 2007), thus moving for sequence closure. After T2’s first increment “Doing” at line 11, Mom produces a continuer (“Mm,”); and then as T2 is delivering her second increment “Independently,” Mom overlaps T2 to produce another “Mm,” continuer, subsequently issuing two identical continuers in a row (“MmhMmhMmh”) as she nods. Mom deploys her head nod here as a nonverbal continuer, visibly withholding a fuller vocal/verbal affiliative response and thus working to compel T2 to continue holding the conversational floor. Stivers (2008, p. 52) argues that nodding done at the end of a telling is not in fact affiliative, but rather will likely be “treated as insufficient, disaligning with the activity by not providing the action that is due.” And by keeping her mouth firmly closed from lines 12 through 15, Mom delivers her continuers to be maximally continuative, hearably and visibly passing an opportunity to produce a turn-at-talk (including during the small silence that develops at line 15).

At line 16, T2 delivers a positively formulated praising summary assessment of how the student is doing in math. She uses her “So”-preface to mark her in-progress assessment as the inferential result of the evidence she has just noted based on the record of the student’s performance (embodied by an open file folder laying on the table in front of her), and to display her readiness to relinquish the conversational floor (Schiffrin, 1987). Despite this action by T2, Mom remains silent at lines 17–18, limiting her response to nodding which, at the very end of the 1.5-sec silence noted at line 18, she converts into a subtle forward bow toward T2 who is seated across the table. Mom intensifies her bowing movements as she mouths a very quiet appreciation token at line 22, which she delivers without vocal sound (as indicated by the “.” symbols). Such an appreciation recognizes the prior as a compliment without being semantically fitted to its specifics (Pomerantz, 1978).
But what is Mom doing by producing her "Thank you very much" at line 22 so quietly that it is basically inaudible? According to Pomerantz (1978, p. 84), “in doing an appreciation, a recipient recognizes the prior not merely as a compliment, but as that sort of compliment which warrants an acceptance... with his acceptance-appreciation, he may be seen to be implicitly agreeing with the prior compliment.” Thus, by producing her utterance at line 22 sotto voce, Mom treats as delicate its implied acceptance of T2’s preceding compliment-via-student-praise, thereby displaying her reluctance to straightforwardly accept it. Speakers regularly use sotto voce as a means of doing a “quiet impropriety” (Lerner, in press), treating their talk as delicate.

Although T2 projects a clear turn completion point at the end of her utterance at line 16, at lines 17–18 a substantial silence develops—time during which Mom is hearably passing an opportunity to produce a responsive turn-at-talk. During this silence, the video shows that T2 removes her gaze from Mom, lowering her eyes down to the skill report document (noted at line 18) as she nods with her mouth firmly closed. And overhearing T1 is also gazing down to the skill report document at this time. Because neither T2 nor T1 is gazing toward Mom from line 18 through the start of line 24, they appear not to perceive Mom’s actions at line 22. Thus, in pursuit of uptake from Mom, T2 says “Congratulations” at line 24, an utterance that explicitly attributes responsibility for the student’s success—in the form of credit—to Mom.

Mom displays her orientation to T2’s “Congratulations” as crediting, complimenting and praising her through her responses at lines 26, 28, and 30. At line 26, Mom delivers a lexical appreciation while simultaneously bowing to T2, actions that together recognize T2’s immediately preceding turn as a compliment without being semantically fitted to its specifics. At line 28, Mom does a referent shift (Pomerantz, 1978), reassigning the credit she has just received from T2 away from herself to her son alone. Through her utterance and gesture at line 28, Mom resists T2’s conflation of her son’s accomplishments with her own, working to disaggregate his agency from hers. And Mom produces both of her utterances (at lines 26 and 28) with infiltrating laugh tokens. Like the parents in Excerpt 1, Mom in Excerpt 2 uses her laughter here to display that T2’s congratulating utterance has “embarrassed” her, thereby showing herself to be uncomfortable receiving this credit. We can thus understand Mom’s laughter as an instance of the laughter recurrently used by praise-recipients as part of doing “being modest/humble.”

T2’s “Congratulations” precipitates a burst of laughter—note the simultaneous onset of laugh tokens from Mom (at line 26), as well as from overhearing T1 (at line 25, continued at line 31), and from the praise-deliverer herself (at lines 27 and 29, continued at line 32). Unlike Mom’s laughter, however, T2 and T1’s laughter cannot be readily understood as doing “modesty.” And none of the participants are laughing because T2 delivered her utterance at line 24 in a nonserious way: T2 did not produce this utterance while smiling nor with within-speech laugh particles (cf. Jefferson, 1979). So how can we understand why the teachers laugh in this sequence? The next section answers this question.
Finding 2: Teachers’ Utterances Crediting Parents for Student Success Engender Laughter

When teachers deliver a positively valenced assessment of the focal student and then go on to explicitly credit that student success to the parent(s), those teachers recurrently laugh following completion of their crediting utterances. Excerpts 3 and 4 exemplify this finding, showing teachers first delivering a praising summary assessment of the student (in Excerpt 3 at lines 1–3 and 5; in Excerpt 4 at lines 26–27), and then explicitly crediting that student success to the parents (at the bolded lines). Each teacher uses a “so”-preface to mark her in-progress assessment of the addressed-recipient parent(s) as her inference based upon the student’s aforementioned praiseable behavior/performance.

Excerpt 3 [13a]

01 T: Ana: is: such a sweetheart. Like she: ‘s just?.hh She ‘s
02 one a those kids thet just.hh knows what tih do\An’ does
03 it\An’ =
04 Mom: = ‘hhm’
05 T: Stays quiet\An’ follows dir\ections\An’ everything.
06 Mom: [pt! hhh hhh hhh
07 T: So yer doin’ a very good job. hhh he\h
08 Mom: [Thanks.

Excerpt 4 [21a] (continuation of Excerpt 1)

26 T: .hh (The:n/A:n) (0.4) academically like
27 s[he’s wo\nderful.
28 Dad: [‘Good,’
29 Mom: [Gre:st.
30 T: [So yer doin’ a great job. =
31 Dad: =Oka\y
32 T: [he be h\e he
33 Mom: [hhuh\h,
34 Dad: [hhh

At the end of line 7 in Excerpt 3, and at line 32 in Excerpt 4, the teachers produce post-utterance completion laugh particles (Jefferson, 1979) immediately after delivering utterances that praise/compliment/credit parents by favorably assessing the “job” they are doing as parents.

Excerpt 5 further exemplifies this pattern. In Excerpt 5, Teacher favorably assesses the third grade student’s performance on an essay she is displaying to Mom and Dad at lines 1–3. Mom responds by laughing at line 4, passing on the opportunity to take a full turn-at-talk. As her laughter decays (at the start of line 6), Mom delivers a sequence-closing assessment—not of the quality of her daughter’s essay per se, but rather of what the experience of reading that essay will be like. And timed to the end of Mom’s laughter (at lines 7–8) Dad produces his own laugh particles. Once again we can see these parents using their laughter as a safe response to Teacher’s favorable assessment of their daughter, because laughing offers them a solution—as praise-recipients—to the interactional problem posed by the concurrent conflicting preferences made relevant by Teacher’s utterance at lines 1–3. Then at line 10 Dad points to and registers a correctly spelled word written by his daughter in the essay, which Mom acknowledges with the continuer “Mhm:::;” (line 12), passing the opportunity to comment on her daughter’s spelling prowess in a substantive
way (a pass she hearably continues during the silence at line 13). Dad then produces a sound at line 14 that does “amazement.”

Excerpt 5 [20a]
01 T: In October they wrote about a perfect da:y.
02 An’ again she’s got four outta foy:ri:t!: h An’
03 has done a great jo:b?
04 Mom: (>umhm <) hih heh heh heh (.).hhh[h! =
05 T: [ptch!
06 Mom: =u::hh [S’unna be fun tuh read. =
07 Dad: [.nh nh! .nh
08 Dad: =[nhh!
09 T: =[Yes.
10 Dad: [Looket.She spelled that right.
11 T: [.hh
12 Mom: Mnhm::;
13 (0.4)
14 Dad: Ts:h:: = (Dad does lateral head shake)
15 T: =Yeah.She’s:: yihknow
16 Dad: =[Yes.h.
17 T: [.hh You did good.heh hih hh [h! .hhh
18 Mom: =Mm b.:m [Mm b.:m
19 Dad: ([Each./Itch.)

At line 15, Teacher first agrees with Dad’s observation about the correctly spelled word, and then she rushes to deliver a second TCU that syntactically projects a favorable assessment of the student. But then Teacher self-initiates repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977) with her sound-stretch on “She’s::,” saying “yihknow" in the place of what she had started to say about the student. At line 17, Teacher re-starts and re-formulates her assessment-in-progress, this time as a praising assessment directly complimenting and crediting the parents’ performance. Teacher’s self-repair initiation and ultimate repair resolution reveal her orientation to the student’s performance as inextricably linked to the parents’ performance. Immediately upon completing this utterance that credits the parents for the student’s success, Teacher laughter.

One way to understand why teachers-as-praise-deliverers laugh is to analyze their laughter as a device for inviting their recipients into a safe compliment response—using their own laughter to display their stance toward their just-completed crediting utterance as placing their parent-recipients into Pomerantz’s (1978) interactional double bind. But this cannot be the only explanation for what teachers are doing by laughing when crediting parents, because teachers do not laugh when they simply compliment the parent for something that parent did, as in Excerpt 6:

Excerpt 6 [04]
01 T2: You are uh wonderful supportive mother with thuh notes,
02 ih anythin[g- trouble goes ho::me,
03 Mom: [hhohhh

nor when they simply deliver a praising assessment of the focal student. Rather, teachers recurrently laugh only after they explicitly credit the parent for something that his/her child did in class/school. As shown in all the preceding exemplars,
teachers systematically place their laugh particles after they complete delivery of their utterances crediting parents. In other words, they do not start laughing while they are still producing the utterance crediting parents, but rather deliver their crediting utterances straight-faced, thereby displaying that they mean them to be taken seriously (Glenn, 2003; Jefferson, 1979).

An additional way to understand why teachers-as-praise-deliverers laugh when they credit parents is to analyze their laughter as a display of their own orientation to what they have just said/done as interactionally problematic and delicate: they are using their laughter as a sign of, and partial remedy for, the delicate action of explicitly assessing/evaluating the parent based upon how the student is performing/behaving in class (cf. Haakana, 2001). Teachers’ crediting utterances make explicit their inference that the parent is primarily and ultimately responsible for the student’s behavior/performance. This is interactionally problematic and delicate for two reasons:

- The official, explicitly sanctioned business of the parent–teacher conference is for parents and teachers to assess and evaluate the student. Although teachers and parents observably behave in ways suggesting that they are each also using the conference—practically and unofficially—as an occasion for assessing/evaluating one another (Pillet-Shore, 2011b), they normally and normatively perform this unofficial business tacitly—strictly “under the surface.” But when a teacher explicitly credits the parent for something that his/her child did in class/school, that teacher “leaks” this unofficial business, momentarily exposing his/her own monitoring and judgment of the parent for how the child is performing in school—an action that embodies an embarrassing “crack” in the surface of the official, ostensible business of the conference (cf. Goffman, 1956; Haakana, 2001).

- When teachers show themselves to be assigning responsibility—in the form of credit—to parents for their children’s triumphs, they implicitly activate and make discursively available the correlative assignment of responsibility—in the form of blame—to parents for their children’s troubles.

Thus we can now understand why the teachers laugh in Excerpt 2. T2’s utterance at line 24 implies her inference that the child’s performance as a student indexes Mom’s performance as a parent. This also helps us further understand line 28, where Mom resists T2’s attribution of responsibility (her infiltrating laughter showing her orientation to the delicacy of the interactional moment), reassigning the credit she has just received from T2 to belonging to her son alone. In managing to laugh together, these parties collaborate not only in constructing their talk as delicate, but also in (at least partially) remedying that delicacy, smoothing over the “crack” in the surface of their official conference business.

**When Parents Praise Students**

Analysis of parents’ talk about focal students—their own children—during parent–teacher conferences reveals that they treat their own articulation of favorable, praising
comments differently than they treat their articulation of unfavorable, criticizing comments. As mentioned earlier, Pillet-Shore (2011b) demonstrates that parents recurrently work to articulate criticizing comments about their children first, producing this talk fluidly and without mitigation or qualification (e.g., see Excerpt 7). Parents thereby treat their own student-criticizing actions as structurally “preferred.” Through these actions, parents show teachers that they are willing and able to publicly articulate student troubles, thus displaying themselves to be credible perceivers, and fair appraisers, of their own children.

This section complements Pillet-Shore’s (2011b) findings by demonstrating that parents treat their articulation of student-praising utterances as structurally “dispreferred” (Heritage, 1984a; Schegloff, 2007). First, this section shows that parents recurrently work to avoid articulating favorable, praising comments about their children. Then, this section shows that, when parents do deliver an utterance that reflects favorably on the student, they systematically delay, qualify and/or account for their talk, self-initiating self-repair to manage how that comment is heard and understood by coparticipants.

Finding 3: Parents Work to Avoid Praising Students

In Excerpt 7, Teacher (T) is displaying “category report” documents to the focal fourth grade student’s legal guardian Grandma (GM). After announcing that she has a pile of such documents (“em” at line 1) “for all thuh su:bject[s]”—with each document showing a detailed evaluation of the student’s performance in a particular subject category—Teacher pulls out a document on the student’s “writing” (line 3), placing it on the tabletop in front of Grandma. During the 1-sec 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 category at line 5, Grandma indexes her continued orientation to the writing document. At lines 6–8 and 10, Grandma articulates the student’s trouble with writing first in terms of sequential placement, offering her own negatively valenced assessment of her grandson’s skills in this area specifically before Teacher articulates her assessment of the student’s writing. At the same time, Grandma works to elide explicit articulation of a positively valenced assessment about the fourth grade student.

Excerpt 7 [07c]
01 T: We have ‘em for all thuh su:bject[s.
02 GM: [O:ka#y.
03 T: Here’s one fer: writing?
04 (1.0)}/{(GM looking at writing document})
05 T: (Then/An’) here’s one-
06 GM: [*His writing skills. [*Wel- An’ =
07 {(*GM doing lateral headshake))
08 GM: =he’s-? d- uhhuh! (.hh W’l *I think = {(*GM brings palm to chest))
09 T: [Yeah.
10 GM: =they’re te:rrible.*But what I’m seeing here,it’s: uh.
11 {(*GM lowers hand from chest to document})
12 T: This: is an indicator that he’s really watching me in class?}
At line 6, Grandma prosodically produces “His writing skills” to convey that she is en route to articulating a negatively valenced comment about the student in this particular subject area. But as she continues to look down at the writing document, she displays that she is just now seeing something on that document that contrasts with the negative stance she was just about to express toward her grandson’s writing. As she goes to articulate the document’s (and Teacher’s) relatively favorable assessment of the student’s writing skills (with her “An’ he’s-? d- uhhuh!,” the “d-” sound about to become “doing”), she cuts off her in-progress talk, instead delivering a breathy laugh particle (“uhhuh!”) right where she had projected her delivery of a positive assessment term (i.e., she does a cut-off just as a delicate term is due; Lerner, in press). Grandma then re-starts her turn midway into line 8 by instead articulating a contrast with the relatively favorable assessment she sees on the document (note her use of contrastive stress on “I” and “terrible”), boldly and straightforwardly stating her own negative assessment of the student’s writing skills: “Wl I think they’re terrible.” Grandma then launches a next TCU with “But,” projecting her incipient articulation of a contrast with what she “thinks” of her grandson’s writing skills. During her utterance at line 10, Grandma gestures to Teacher’s writing evaluation document as she says, “what I’m seeing here, it’s: uh; i; sound-stretching her two final sounds and delivering an “uh;” as a means of achieving a trail-off right at the very moment her immediately preceding syntax has projected her articulation of a favorable assessment of the student.

Inspecting Grandma’s talk at lines 6, 8, and 10, we can see that she is treating her articulation of a criticizing assessment of her grandson differently than her articulation of a praising assessment. Grandma delivers an unfavorable assessment of the student (e.g., “Wl I think they’re terrible.”) fluidly and without mitigation or qualification, displaying her orientation to her own articulation of the student’s trouble with writing as preferred. But Grandma produces her talk that projects her delivery of a favorable assessment (“An’ he’s-? d- uhhuh!”; “But what I’m seeing here; it’s: uh;”) with a series of speech perturbations, ultimately suppressing her articulation of a favorable assessment altogether via trail-off (i.e., she trails-off before voicing a delicate matter; Lerner, in press). Grandma thereby shows herself to be self-initiating repair within the trouble-source turn (Schegloff et al., 1977), displaying her reluctance to articulate the projected favorable 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 displays her orientation to her own explicit articulation of a favorable, praising comment about the student as a dispreferred and delicate social action (Lerner, in press).

Parents systematically manifest trouble articulating any utterance that reflects favorably on the focal student. One way parents manifest this trouble is by self-initiating self-repair, producing a series of speech perturbations as a key design feature of their talk that immediately projects delivery something favorable about the student. We see this in Excerpt 7 above, which shows the student’s legal guardian Grandma self-initiating repair around, and thus treating as a trouble-source, a favorable assessment of the student. Below, Excerpt 8 shows the student’s Mom
self-initiating repair not around an assessment, but rather around a question that implies that she thinks her son merits inclusion in an honors-level class.

Excerpt 8 is taken from a conference that occurs toward the end of March, about two-and-a-half months before the end of the academic school year. Leading up to this point in the interaction, Teacher has positively assessed the student to Mom (e.g., “He’s doin’ very well”; “He’s really one uh thuh stars in the class”). At lines 1–3, Mom initiates a new topic/sequence by asking Teacher—her son’s current seventh-grade teacher—about her son’s upcoming eighth-grade year.

Excerpt 8 [02b]
01 Mom: hh Now fer eighth gra::de, are all the teachers eighth
grade teachers pretty much across the boa::rd (.) fer
02 T: [pt! hh
03 T: As: fer- Qh. >As fer like an
04 Mom: hono{rs progra:m} = er something?
05 T: [pt! Fer- ye:a h.
06 Mom: (We/They) don’t have {anything like that. Ri:: g h t,
07 T: [.hh We don’t have an honors program
08 Mom: in junior hi::gh.
10 T: =0:ka::y.

At the end of line 1 and the beginning of line 2, Mom does a self-initiated repair insertion of “eighth grade” before she says “teachers” for the second time—an insertion of a phrase (“eighth grade”) that she has already said toward the beginning of line 1. Mom is thus displaying that she is having trouble designing her question, including as she produces the sound-stretch and pause perturbations as she says, “boa::rd ()” at line 2. In this first part of her turn, Mom is asking Teacher if all the eighth-grade teachers are, in a sense, equal or equivalent from her and her son’s perspective—that is, do all eighth-grade teachers accept all eighth grade students regardless of their level of academic achievement? By continuing her turn after she has completed this TCU to say, “er ither- ither enny fe:r (0.4)” (i.e., or are there- are there any for), Mom makes it easier for Teacher to answer “no” and confirm that indeed there are no specialized eighth-grade teachers. But just as she does this, she starts displaying that she is having trouble formulating the alternative to the eighth-grade teachers being “across the board” by once again producing perturbations in her talk, cutting-off and then repeating “ither,” sound-stretching “fer,” and then pausing for 0.4-sec as a means of achieving a trail-off right at the very moment her immediately preceding syntax has projected her articulation of the delicate alternative: that there are eighth-grade teachers who teach honors-level students. By inquiring about the existence of an honors-level class alternative, Mom implies that she considers her son to be qualified for inclusion in an honors-level class.

At lines 5–6, Teacher provides the candidate phrase “honors progra:m,” that he hears as implied by, and yet missing from, Mom’s immediately preceding talk. At lines 7–8, Mom quickly confirms that Teacher has indeed articulated the correct “thing” that she was alluding to in her previous turn, but she does so, not accidentally, without repeating any part of the phrase “honors program” (cf. Schegloff, 1996), instead saying “(We/They) don’t have anything like that.” Through
her quick deployment of her sequence-closing third token “O:ka:y” at line 11 (note the latching between lines 10–11), Mom works to achieve quick exit from this sequence, thereby further displaying her orientation to her immediately preceding question about an honors program as delicate. Thus through her actions in this sequence, Mom manages to imply but never explicitly articulate something favorable about the student—that he deserves to be included in an honors-level class—leaving that up to Teacher to do (Lerner, in press).

Parents’ work to avoid articulating favorable, praising comments about their children to teachers can also be observed during sequences in which both parent and teacher deliver assessments of the same student-related referent. In such cases, parents’ assessments are recurrently downgraded relative to teachers’ assessments, as exemplified by Excerpt 9. Taken from the same conference as Excerpt 8, Excerpt 9 shows Mom working to specifically avoid repeating the upgraded favorable assessments that Teacher has delivered about her son throughout their conference interaction, including most proximally at line 6 below when Teacher says, “He’s doin’ really we(hh)!!.” As they are moving to close their conference interaction, at line 2 Mom starts delivering an evidential summary formulation of her understanding of Teacher’s assessments of her son throughout the conference.

Excerpt 9 (02c)

01 Mom: Oka:y. Alri::ght.
02 Mom: .hh[hh Well it sounds:: (.) good with me:: Like I =
03 T: [ptch! '['(A’right?)'"
04 Mom: =said I didn’t think there were really any
05 [big pro::blems But it’s good tih hear thet he’s=
06 T: [No. He’s: He’s doin’ really we(hh)!!].
07 Mom: =doing oka::y. [Alri::ght.
08 Mom: .hh [Well – I think that would be it the::n.
09 T: ['Very good’

By noting at line 4 that she “didn’t think there were really any big pro::blems,” Mom is massively understating her son’s academic standing/situation. Despite the fact that Teacher has presented a glowing report of the student’s progress and achievement to Mom throughout the duration of their conference, Mom still formulates the upshot of what she has heard from Teacher as being “thet he’s doin’ oka:’y.” (at lines 5 and 7). Mom’s talk at line 5 and Teacher’s talk at line 6 are produced in overlap competition—their overlap extends beyond the initial three to four beats that represent “quick resolution,” and thus they are displaying that they are each pursuing some interest (Schegloff, 2000, p. 24). At line 6, Teacher manifests interest in persisting in overlap to articulate an upgraded assessment of the student’s overall performance, “He’s doin’ really we(hh)!!.” But at line 5 (after which she emerges into the clear at line 7), Mom manifests interest in persisting in overlap to continue her in-progress formulation of the student’s performance as evidence that “he’s doing oka::y,” a relatively downgraded second position assessment (Pillet-­Shore, 2003; Pomerantz, 1984). By specifically not repeating Teacher’s relatively upgraded assessment, Mom presents herself as restrained when it comes to delivering an utterance that reflects favorably on her son.
This article has thus far demonstrated that parents work to avoid articulating favorable, praising comments about students. Parents manifest concern to defend against the possible interpretation that they are in any way praising their own children throughout the duration of the parent–teacher conference, including after the launch of conference business (e.g., Excerpts 1 and 3), after teachers present their assessments/evaluations of specific student work (e.g., Excerpt 5) or student performance in specific subject areas (e.g., Excerpt 2), and also during the closing sequence of the conference (e.g., Excerpt 9). The next exemplar, Excerpt 10, shows that parents also manifest this concern during the opening sequence (Pillet-Shore, 2008) even before involved participants have launched official conference business, thus revealing this indeed to be a multiphase concern.

Finding 4: Parents Work to Manage How Their Praise of Students is Understood

Overwhelmingly, parents work to avoid articulating praising comments about students. But this section shows two rare instances when a parent delivers an utterance that reflects favorably on the student, demonstrating that, in each case, the parents systematically delay, qualify and/or account for their talk, self-initiating repair to manage how that comment is heard and understood by coparticipants. Excerpt 10 takes place just after Mom arrives at Teacher’s classroom. Before she takes her seat next to Teacher to launch their conference business, Mom mentions to the researcher (“R”) (who has just set up the video camera and is attempting to exit the room) that she had thought she and Teacher might not have “anything to talk about” worthy of study because:

Excerpt 10 [02a]

At lines 1–2 and 6, Mom is not directly assessing the student’s academic achievement; rather she is merely reporting a favorable fact (cf. Drew, 1984) about her seventh-grade son Jason—that he has “like a <four point o::h.> GPA” (i.e., a perfect or “straight A” grade point average). In addition, unlike previous exemplars, Mom is not
directly addressing this utterance to Teacher; rather she is gazing at and visibly addressing her talk to the researcher (though of course still producing her utterance sensitive to overhearing Teacher). Nevertheless, Mom self-initiates repair in that turn’s transition space (Schegloff et al., 1977) with her “I mean:”-prefaced utterance, working to qualify and manage how her 4.0 GPA comment is heard and understood by her interlocutors. By saying, “I’m not bragging,” Mom negatively formulates her immediately preceding action, working to preempet her interlocutors from viewing her as a “braggart” and/or potentially sanctioning her for appearing to indulge in a form of self-praise. As Mom goes on to positively formulate the action she “meant” to do through her preceding utterance (“but I’m just saying…”), Teacher partially overlaps her talk (at line 12) to recycle a key lexical item from Mom’s utterance, “Brag!”, smiling as he encourages and licenses her to do so (at lines 12 and 16). Through this sequence, Mom treats her articulation of her son’s perfect GPA as a form of dispreferred self-praise.

Excerpt 11 provides a final example of parents’ work to manage how their favorable, praising comments about students are heard and understood by coparticipants. This excerpt is, however, different from the preceding exemplars in that it shows a parent (the student’s Dad) producing a positively valenced assessment of the student’s reading performance/ability. In the immediate wake of articulating this praise of his own child to Teacher, both Dad and Mom display their concern to manage how that praising utterance is heard and understood by Teacher, working to restore their credibility as reasonable, reliable appraisers of their own child.

Leading up to Excerpt 11, Teacher has initiated a sequence in which she solicits Mom and Dad’s assessment of the third grade student’s reading at home. After Mom says “He is our best reader, He loves to read,” assessing the focal student favorably relative to her other two children, Teacher asks the parents if, after reading a story with the student, they talk with him about what happened in that story. Dad responds to this question starting at line 1 below.

Excerpt 11 [12a]
01 Dad: I’ll usually ask like one or two questions. >Because
02 I wanna make sure that he understood what he just read.
03 T: An’ [he’s] okay with that.
04 Dad: [Like–]
05 Dad: [Yeah.]
06 T: [Okay.]
07 Mom: [Seems to be,]
08 T: [Okay]
09 Dad: Yeah. I would say [he’s] amazing. To me.
10 >I mean he’s my own child but [hh Compared to thee =
11 T: [Well, yea(h)hh hhh]
12 Dad: [other two in thuh family?]
13 (0.6)
14 Mom: [Just (.) night n’ dayy.]
15 Dad: [Just (.) night n’ dayy.]
16 Mom: [Just (.) night n’ dayy.]
17 T: [Just ‘with’ thuh reading thing.]
18 Dad: [Just ‘with’ thuh reading thing.]
19 T: [Okay.]
20 Mom: [Okay.]
21 Dad: [Okay.]
22 Mom: [Okay.]

Excerpt 11 [12b]
23 T: [Okay.]
24 Dad: [Okay.]
25 Mom: [Okay.]
26 T: [Okay.]
27 Dad: [Okay.]
28 Mom: [Okay.]
29 T: [Okay.]
30 Dad: [Okay.]
31 Mom: [Okay.]
32 T: [Okay.]
33 Dad: [Okay.]
34 Mom: [Okay.]
35 T: [Okay.]
36 Dad: [Okay.]
37 Mom: [Okay.]
38 T: [Okay.]
39 Dad: [Okay.]
40 Mom: [Okay.]

D. Pillet-Shore
fer even saying that... About him? hh An’ you and I
touched on this one day was: where– from where he
came fr[om as an infant.
T: [‘Oh absolutely.’”
T: [‘Absolutely.’
Mom: [.h To where he ~ ~is toda~y. [Is why ~:
T: [‘Yeah.’
T: Yeah.
Mom: Yih know |where: >I mean <.h That he doesn’t =
T: [‘Yeah.’
Mom: =write (0.7) yih know with much detail:, or (eh) like
that. =It’s: to me: (0.5) He’s come so far. So I accept;

At line 3, Teacher delivers an “and-prefaced formulation” (Bolden, 2010) via declarative assertion about the student’s displayed reading comprehension at home—something treated as squarely within Dad’s domain of knowledge and experience. Teacher thereby articulates something inferable from, yet “unsaid” in, Dad’s preceding talk and seeks his confirmation. By proffering “okay” as a candidate assessment at line 3, Teacher is offering “the better of two alternative values (‘okay’ = not having problems/“not okay” = having problems) within a binary metric of student assessment” (Pillet-Shore, 2003). At line 5, Dad confirms Teacher’s “okay” = no problems assessment straightforwardly, and at line 6 Teacher accepts his assessment with a quiet sequence-closing third acknowledgment token. Through this action, Teacher affiliates with Dad by showing that she endorses his perspective.

At line 7, however, Mom produces her own second pair part response (to Teacher’s utterance at line 3) that downgrades Dad’s assessment by introducing some uncertainty about the student’s reading performance at home. Hearing Mom’s downgrade, Dad works at line 9 to upgrade both the certainty level and valence of his assessment of his son’s reading ability, first by repeating his “Yeah” and then going on to replace Teacher’s “okay” assessment term with the upgraded assessment term “amazing.” Dad is thereby working to override the default binary “okay”/“not okay” metric that Teacher made relevant at line 3 by replacing it with a gradated metric (Pillet-Shore, 2003) within which his son’s performance in reading is much better than “okay”—it’s “amazing.” Thus, at line 9, Dad articulates his favorable assessment of the student in second position as a means of counteracting and overcoming Mom’s expressed doubt vis-à-vis Teacher.

Through the way Dad designs his utterance at lines 9–10 and 12, he displays his orientation to his own explicit articulation of this favorable assessment of his son as dispreferred. Rather than producing his assessment straightforwardly and without delay, Dad delays his delivery of the upgraded assessment term “amazing” at line 9 by producing a series of speech perturbations (his intraturn in-breath “.hh” and 0.7-sec pause, cut-off on the “eh-” sound, and “uh”) immediately leading up to it. Through these perturbations, Dad shows himself to be self-initiating repair within the trouble-source turn, displaying his treatment of his projected assessment term “amazing” as the trouble-source and thereby showing reluctance to articulate this favorable assessment of his own child (particularly in light of its status as an upgraded evaluative term relative to Mom and Teacher’s preceding evaluative terms).
And critically, immediately after delivering this assessment term, Dad begins to qualify his assessment of his son to manage how it is heard and understood by coparticipants. He does this qualification first by adding the increment “To me,” and then by once again self-initiating repair in that turn’s transition space with his “I mean”-prefaced utterance. By saying, “> I mean he’s my own child,” Dad is working to show Teacher that he is a credible and reasonable person/parent (cf. Haakana, 2001) who recognizes that his favorable assessment of the student is liable to being heard by Teacher as biased/nonobjective and thus “discounted” because it compromises his tacit claim to be a “fair appraiser” of his own child’s strengths and weaknesses (Pillet-Shore, 2011b).

Tellingly, Teacher moves to discount Dad’s favorable assessment of the student with her actions at line 11, where she says “Well, yea(h)h hih hih” as she nods and smiles, visibly and hearably minimizing and dismissing Dad’s assessment precisely on those grounds (that he is biased/nonobjective). Dad works to restore his credibility by saying, “but .hh Compared to thee other two: in thuh family?,” showing himself to be willing and capable of ranking the focal student’s reading abilities relative to his other children, thus portraying himself as not simply “blinded by love.”

Mom also treats Dad’s favorable assessment of their son as dispreferred through her actions starting at line 14, working to provide an elaborate account for why Dad (whom Mom refers to by his first name “Sy” at line 21) has just articulated such an upgraded favorable assessment of the focal student. (And notice how Mom aggregates herself with Dad at line 21 by saying, “Sy and I’s motivation fer even saying that,” constituting herself as a coauthor of his favorable assessment of the student and thereby sharing responsibility for, and showing herself to agree with, Dad’s student-praising utterance.) In so doing, Mom treats Dad’s preceding talk as requiring repair. Thus, over the course of this sequence, both Dad and Mom work to manage Dad’s delivery of a dispreferred favorable assessment of the student.

These data thus demonstrate that parents treat their own explicit articulation of favorable comments about students as “dispreferred,” not only because such comments implicate self-praise, but also—and perhaps more important in the parent–teacher conference context—because such comments compromise parents’ tacit claim to be credible perceivers and fair appraisers of their own children.

Conclusions

Closely inspecting video-recorded naturally occurring sequences of parent–teacher interaction in which participants praise focal nonpresent students, this article has demonstrated that conference participants treat: (1) teachers’ praise of students as tantamount to compliments of parents; and (2) parents’ praise of students—their own children—as tantamount to self-praise. Although the action of praising students would seem to, a priori, afford a mutually enjoyable moment of celebration transparently supportive of social solidarity, this research has revealed that conference participants treat this action as interactionally problematic precisely because utterances that praise students implicate praise of parents.
When a teacher praises the student by producing a positively valenced initial assessment of that student’s academic performance and/or in-class behavior, s/he places the addressed-recipient parent(s) into the compliment response double bind. A teacher’s student-praising utterance, on the one hand, provides the relevance of a second assessment from the parent that observes the preference to agree with and accept the teacher’s prior praising assessment; but on the other hand, it also provides the relevance of a response from the parent that observes the preference to avoid self-praise. Thus, parents confront the interactional problem of producing a response that somehow displays sensitivity to these concurrently unsatisfiable preferences. This article has shown that parents systematically deal with this problem by passing the opportunity to deliver a full (i.e., lexical, substantive) turn-at-talk immediately following teachers’ student-praising utterances. Instead, parents regularly produce laugh tokens, continuers (e.g., “Mm hm”; head nods), or allow silence to develop. And when parents do deliver a lexical responsive turn, it recurrently takes the form of a sequence-closing acknowledgment token. Through their use of these interactional resources, parents index their orientation to the teacher’s preceding student-praising utterance as a compliment, displaying their sensitivity to the need to acknowledge the teacher’s praise and avoid responding in a way that is semantically fitted to its specifics.

But parents’ work to avoid the implications of self-praise by withholding a fuller verbal response apparently engenders another interactional problem. Because teachers’ student-praising utterances are often met with no substantive uptake from parents (despite the fact that teachers recurrently project a clear turn completion point), teachers may go on to explicitly credit that student success to the parent(s) in pursuit of uptake. Immediately upon completing such an utterance that credits the parents for the student’s success, teachers laugh, displaying their own orientation to what they have just said/done as interactionally problematic and delicate. Teachers use their laughter as a sign of, and partial remedy for, the delicate action of explicitly assessing the parent based upon how the student is performing/behaving. Teachers’ crediting utterances expose their inference that the parent is primarily and ultimately responsible for the student’s behavior/performance, momentarily leaking some of the unofficial business of the conference: teachers’ monitoring and judgment of the parent for how the child is performing in school. Teachers’ crediting utterances thus embody an embarrassing “crack” in the surface of the official business of the conference (i.e., teachers’ and parents’ joint monitoring and assessment of the student).

In addition, this article has shown that a parent’s action of implying or stating praise of the student also occasions interactional problems. Parents systematically manifest trouble articulating utterances that reflect favorably on the student—they produce their talk projecting delivery of a student-praising utterance with a series of speech perturbations, self-initiating repair in an effort to avoid its articulation. And when they do deliver an utterance that reflects favorably on the student, they systematically delay, qualify and/or account for their talk, self-initiating repair to manage how that comment is heard and understood by coparticipants. This research
has demonstrated that parents manifest concern to defend against the possible interpretation that they are in any way praising their own children throughout the duration of the parent—teacher conference, not only because such talk implicates self-praise, but also because such comments compromise parents’ tacit claim to be credible perceivers, and fair appraisers, of their own children.

Offering insight into parent—teacher communication, this article has used the language and social interaction perspective to examine a phenomenon relevant to interpersonal, family and educational communication. This article also makes three larger contributions. First, this research extends the literature on evaluative talk about people not present (e.g., Hallett, Harger & Eder, 2009), complementing previous researchers’ focus on negatively valenced, critical talk by analyzing positively valenced, praising talk about absent persons. Second, this research contributes to conversation analytic literature on both preference organization and praising in interaction, providing much-needed analysis of multimodal aspects of praise-delivery and reception, as well as participants’ orientation to praising actions in institutional interactions. Third, the findings of this article contribute to politeness and pragmatics literature (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987) by adding important nuance to our understanding of what constitutes “a compliment” and “self-praise.” This research shows that the action of complimenting can be done not only by directly positively assessing some aspect of one’s addressed-recipient, but also by praising someone or something that person “owns”—someone for whom (or something for which) that person is regarded as responsible. Likewise, this research shows that the action of self-praising includes not only a speaker’s self-directed favorable talk, but also a speaker’s favorable talk about someone or something s/he “owns,” thus empirically demonstrating the distributed and heterogeneous character of “the self.”

Notes

[2] A TCU is a fundamental unit of speech (e.g., a sentence; a word) out of which a speaker may construct a turn-at-talk in conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).
[3] The very few (two) cases I have of a parent producing a sequence-expanding lexical responsive turn show parents delivering an intended exception that (at least partially) invalidates or disagrees with the teacher’s preceding praise of the child. For example:

[23] 01 T: Chelsea is such a sweethear[<.-Like she’s such .h She’= 02 Mom: ]0;¡h.
  03 T: =such [a doll:].
  04 Mom: [<Which is so funny.> .h Becuz she’s not ’like that 05 at home.’]

[4] See Atkinson & Heritage (1984) for a guide to transcription symbols. Data in this article also use bold to indicate target utterances, the British pound sign “£” to indicate smile voice, the inverted question mark “¿” to indicate intonation between continuing and rising, the exclamation point “!” following an abruptly punctuated sound, and the tilde “~” to indicate shaky voice. In addition, an asterisk “*” is used to indicate onset of visible conduct described inside double parentheses “[( )].”
A native speaker of Japanese, Mom is deploying her bowing movements (noted at lines 21, 23, and 26) as an integrated part of her overall thanking/appreciating action (Ohashi, 2010).

References


