



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

‘Boys are Better than Girls!’. ‘That’s not True! Girls are Kind, Boys are Rude!’. Dialogic Mediation of Gender Conflicts as an Opportunity for Promoting Respect and Equality

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Article first published online

February 2020

HOW TO CITE

Rossi, E. (2020). ‘Boys are Better than Girls!’. ‘That’s not True! Girls are Kind, Boys are Rude!’. Dialogic Mediation of Gender Conflicts as an Opportunity for Promoting Respect and Equality. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 12(1), 322-346. doi: 10.14658/pupj-ijse-2020-1-17

‘Boys are Better than Girls!’. ‘That’s not True! Girls are Kind, Boys are Rude!’. Dialogic Mediation of Gender Conflicts as an Opportunity for Promoting Respect and Equality

Elisa Rossi

Abstract: The paper presents an analysis of research data recently collected through the video-recording of adult-children interactions and conflicts between children, during discussion activities on cultural and gender differences within Italian educational contexts. The general objective is to show the ways in which conflicts among classmates display the relevance of gender, the forms of communication adults can use to manage gender conflicts and the effects of these forms on children’s participation. A more specific aim is to draw attention to dialogic, narrative and transformative mediation in managing gender conflicts among classmate, an aspect not sufficiently investigated until now. In cases of gender conflicts, dialogic, narrative, and transformative mediation can be interpreted as a form of communication in which the mediator, adopting dialogic actions, challenges stereotypes and bias, promotes dialogue and understanding between the parties, and seeks to support and to co-construct new narratives of their relationships, based on respect for mutual differences and equality.

Keywords: children, school interactions, gender conflicts, dialogic mediation

Introduction

The present paper concerns the analysis of adult-children interactions, recently video-recorded during discussion activities on cultural and gender differences, within Italian educational settings. In particular, the focus is on gender conflicts between children and their management by an adult. My general objective is to show the ways in which conflicts among classmates display the relevance of gender, the forms of communication adults can use to manage gender conflicts and the effects of these forms on children's participation. A more specific aim is to examine in greater depth, by highlighting potentialities and problems, the ways in which dialogic, narrative and transformative mediation can manage gender conflicts, challenge generalisations and stereotypes, promote equality and respect for mutual differences in children's relationships.

Drawing on a constructivist theory which views social systems as communication systems and on dialogue studies, the first section introduces the main forms of communication which can be observed in adult-children interactions in school contexts, i.e. educational monologue and dialogic facilitation. In the second section I present a new approach to gender conflicts in educational settings, that combines four different perspectives: 1) the theory of conflict as a system of communication; 2) the conceptualisation of children as active agents in social interactions and in (gender) socialisation through negotiation and interpretative reproduction; 3) the theory of gender as an on-going interactional accomplishment, which is performed, situational, and negotiated, but also influenced by the gender structure; 4) the methodology of Conversation Analysis, with particular attention to the relevance of gender in conflictual interactions. The third section concerns the different forms of conflict management within schools: usually, prevention, avoidance, and diversion when conflicts are considered as irrelevant; zero tolerance and normative resolution when they're observed as relevant. Drawing on dialogue and mediation studies, the fourth section turns to present dialogic, narrative, and transformative mediation of conflicts as a form of communication in which the mediator, relying on dialogic actions, primarily promotes dialogue between the parties, the mutual satisfaction of their expectations and new narratives of their relationships. The theoretical conceptualisation will be followed by a description of the data, which were collected within two research programs, and an analysis of the data, which contains the most important forms of conflict management observed when gender became relevant, i.e. dialogic mediation, normative resolution, and ambivalent forms. In the last section, I will discuss and provide some concluding remarks by interpreting the data in the light of the outlined background.

Classroom communication and interaction

According to the Luhmann's theory of social systems (1984), education is a form of communication which mainly takes place in school contexts, definable as social systems. Social systems are systems of communications, while communication is the unit of an interaction. In communication, participants understand their interlocutors' actions, construct and coordinate social meaning, cultural forms, and orientations towards social phenomena (Pearce, 1989).

Aimed at children's learning and at the shaping of their personalities, the traditional form of *education*, i.e. instruction, is oriented towards (see Luhmann & Schorr, 1979): a) the correct/incorrect distinction, for the codification of the contents accepted within the communication process; b) the hierarchical positioning as roles (teacher/student), with the expectation of standardised and depersonalised performances; c) the expectation of cognitive (and normative) results of communication, i.e. the learning (and the respect for school rules). These *patterns of expectations* allow for the continuing evaluation of children's contributions and role performances as correct or incorrect. Patterns of expectations that can also be interpreted as *cultural presuppositions* of education. For instance, traditional education in schools is still commonly achieved through *didactic triplets*, often known as the sequences 'Initiation-Reply-Evaluation' (IRE) or 'Question-Answer-Follow up' (QAF) (e.g., Fele & Paoletti, 2003; McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), which shed light on an asymmetry of conversational rights and obligations (Edwards & Westgate, 1994). Traditional education is also associated with *monologues*, which are typically one-sided discussions in which 'the expert', i.e. the teacher, holds the epistemic authority and displays actions such as explanations, instructions, directives, and evaluations towards 'the recipients', i.e. the students (Anderson & Ciliberti, 2002). Monologue can be considered as a form of interaction characterized by a control of the interlocutors' participation, a lack of listening and sensitivity for different perspectives, feelings and thoughts, a hierarchical positioning associated with a right-wrong distinction, and the imposition of one's own perspective on to others' (e.g., Bohm, 1996; Littlejohn & Domenici, 2001; Wadensjö, 1998).

Dialogue, on the contrary, is a form of communication with different cultural presuppositions (e.g., Baraldi, 2009; Bohm, 1996; Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001; Heritage, 1985; Hutchby, 2005; Littlejohn, 2004; Littlejohn & Domenici, 2001; Pearce & Pearce, 2003; Rogers, 1951), specifically: 1) a fair distribution of active participation (*equity*); 2) attention, sensitivity and active listening to the interlocutors' feelings, experiences and thoughts (*empathy*); 3) acknowledgement, understanding, respect, trust, reciprocity and

coordination of different perspectives (*empowerment*); 4) the positioning of the participants as unique, specific and autonomous persons; 5) the primacy of affective expectations, which are based on the value of self-expression and the recognition of personal opinions, feelings, experiences and narratives. A dialogic communication can be accomplished through specific *dialogic actions*, such as: a) promotional and clarification (open) questions, as well as encouragements and invitations, in order to foster the interlocutor's active participation; b) echoes, minimal responses, and feedback of understanding, confirmation and appreciation, in order to display an active listening to the interlocutor's perspective; c) formulations of the content of the previous turn/s, in order to make the 'gist' explicit, as well as to develop or summarise it, and to relaunch communication; d) personal expressions and narratives, in order to enhance the value of self-expression, the affective form of expectations, the positioning of the participants as persons.

Within multicultural Western societies, the increasing importance of dialogic approaches, of children as *persons* in their uniqueness and specificity, and of diversity (culture, ethnicity, language, gender, etc.) (see Baraldi, 2012) allows for the contemplation of alternative forms of education to IRE/IRF, for example facilitation, cooperative learning, peer education, and more recently dialogic teaching. *Facilitation* is a practice in which the teacher-facilitator pursue a student-centred and an activity-based approach by promoting children's active participation, collaboration and responsibility in their learning process (e.g., De Sario & Fedi, 2011; Houff, 2010). *Cooperative learning* (e.g., Comoglio, 2000; Gobbo, 2010; Johnson & Johnson, 1975, Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1998; Slavin, 1980; Talamo, 2003) is based on student's active participation and interaction, with the role of teacher as facilitator, and it is often used for inclusive and intercultural education; through cooperative learning, children can help each other, create positive interpersonal relationships, interpret each learning activity as a group problem-solving exercise, make self-evaluation of the group work, and experience positive ways of managing conflicts. *Peer education* (or *peer learning*) as well (e.g., Boda, 2006; Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001; Croce & Gnemmi, 2006; Pellai, Rinaldin & Tamborini, 2002) is a student-centred practice, aimed at empowering children with individual and social abilities (respect, trust, cooperation), and at preventing bullying, violence, and sexual risks; in peer education, students are expected to be tutors in charge of exchanging experiences and ideas with peers, promoting reflection and learning by doing, while adults are expected to act as supervisors and facilitators of the interaction between children. Finally, *dialogic teaching* (e.g., Alexander, 2017; Littleton & Howe, 2010; Lyle, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2012; Molinari & Mameli, 2010; O'Connor & Michaels, 2007; Selleri, 2016) is a recent form of education mainly finalised to overcome monological and directive teaching, to privilege the promotion of

children's participation, interaction, voicing and reflective learning, to foster and extend students' thinking and advance their learning and understanding through dialogic actions.

Facilitation and dialogic teaching brings to mind another form of interaction sometimes used during extra-curricular discussion activities and workshops (for instance on cultural differences, gender differences, etc.) carried out in educational settings, namely *dialogic facilitation* (e.g., Baraldi, 2012, 2014). However, the major objective of a dialogic facilitator is to enhance children's participation, empowerment and agency, not their learning and assessment. Relying on dialogic actions and orienting communications towards the primacy of affective expectations, the positioning of participants as persons, and the value of self-expression, a dialogic facilitator principally aims to promote: 1) children's active participation and personal expression; 2) dialogue among children, not only in adult-child dyadic sequences; 3) children's agency in producing knowledge, by downgrading adults' epistemic authority; 4) the empowerment of children's different perspectives and the coordination among them; 5) children's reflections on the different ideas, experiences, emotions and feelings voiced; 6) children's doubts on common sense, stereotypes, prejudices; 7) the co-construction of new stories, alternative to the master-narrative.

The increasing relevance of persons and diversity, as well as of dialogic forms of interaction which prioritize children's active participation, opens up new opportunities for conflicts to occur and to affect educational communication.

Gender conflicts in schools

Diversity, in fact, often produces contradictions (in opinions, experiences, feeling, values, interests, needs, expectations, etc.) and contradictions create conflicts. *Conflict* can be defined as a particular social system, i.e. a system of communications, which is characterized by a *communicated contradiction*, as pointed out by Luhmann (1984). This communicated contradiction, or the communication of a contradiction, is typically a refusal, an opposition, an accusation, or an insult, followed by another refusal, opposition, accusation, insult, and so on; from this perspective, only when it is observable in communication, a conflict takes place.

In classroom interactions, conflicts can be observed, mainly by teachers, as *irrelevant*, when they do not block the cultural form that orient communication and terminate without any intervention, or on the contrary as *relevant*, since they can destabilize, make uncertain or even block ongoing communicative processes (Iervese, 2007). In this second case, conflicts can escalate and become destructive, threaten the conditions of teaching and of

sociality among children. For this reasons, contradictions can be observed by adults as problems to be solved quickly in a normative and asymmetrical way; nevertheless, when managed rapidly *and* in constructive ways, they do not undermine the reproduction of communication, rather they can become a resource and an opportunity for improving it.

The escalation and potentially destructive conflicts among children, in formal and informal contexts, are normally based on monologues, mostly *ethnocentric monologues*, in which the We-Identity has a positive and a higher value, and the participants take a hierarchical positioning in interaction (Pearce, 1989). As Bohm (1996) argued, in monologues, participants: a) consider as true, correct and indisputable their own action; b) judge negatively and attribute errors to their interlocutors' actions; c) lack attention and sensitivity towards their interlocutors' thoughts, experiences, and feelings; d) show indifference toward the consequences of their own actions for their interlocutors.

Conflicts in classrooms, especially during adolescence, can show a *gender dimension* and lead to sexual bullying, both in mixed-sex groups and single-sex groups of students (Duncan, 1999), and more broadly to gender-based violence (Dunne, Humphreys & Leach, 2006), often encouraged by gendered spaces and by formal and informal rules and practices in school settings, which are aimed at reproducing a male dominated gender hierarchy through strategies of segregation and differentiation (Dunne & Leach, 2007). So, interactions within educational contexts often (re)produce gender stereotypes, bias, discrimination and inequalities. In general, according to Risman (2004) and Connell (2009), gender is a structure of inequality which is constructed and embedded at the institutional, individual, and interactional levels of every society, a set of lasting and widespread patterns, norms, values, expectations, discourses and narratives for identities and relationships, created through communication, which determines a *gender order*, i.e. a specific system of relationships, characterised mostly by binary identities and hierarchical relationships between men and women. Gender is an *ongoing accomplishment*, displayed, performed, 'done' in social situations and everyday interactions (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1977; West & Zimmerman, 1987). However, though under the influence (in terms of constraints and opportunities) of the gender structure, in social interactions individuals can *negotiate*, adapt and 'redo', deconstruct and 'undo', reject and try to subvert gender dichotomy and hierarchy (Butler, 2004; Connell, 2009; Connell 2010; Deutsch, 2007; Lorber, 2005; Risman, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 2009).

One of the most popular theories on gender conflicts (Tannen, 1990) interpreted them as connected to gender differences in language use, originating from the different socialisation processes for boys and girls. According to this approach, inspired by the work of Maltz and Borker (1982), misun-

derstandings and conflicts are normal: boys are used to playing and chatting with their male classmates in ways in which status, hierarchy, assertiveness and independence are crucial, whereas girls prefer to play and chat with their female classmates in ways in which the priority is given to intimacy, bonding, relationships, care, equity and (inter)dependence. Taking part in these two different linguistic worlds, or *two cultures*, boys and girls socialise using two different styles of communication, and in two different ways of managing conflicts: one is more competitive, individualistic and monological, which relates to the boys, the other one more cooperative, empathic and dialogic related to the girls. Evidence confirmed, in the Italian context, for instance by Fucci (2008), who also underlines that boys usually prefer to self-manage conflicts, while girls seek the help of a significant adult for dispute resolution. However, as pointed out by Sheldon (1990) and Duncan (1999), gender behavior and use of language depend on situations and contexts: boys' and girls' styles in conflict are not mutually exclusive, there can be overlap in their interactional choices, and abusive gendered power relationships can also occur in groups of girls. A second theoretical perspective, from a feminist viewpoint, identifies the main origin of gender conflicts and gender-based violence with *patriarchal sociocultural systems*, based on male dominance and female oppression, with while a third standpoint (e.g., Callà, 2011) argues that conflicts and violence, especially in intimate relationships, arise from *multiple factors* (individual, familiar, contextual), among which the contribution of socialisation to the creation of gender identities, relations, practices is just one aspect.

In this paper, the approach to gender conflicts combines four different perspectives: 1) Luhmann's theory on conflict as a system of interaction; 2) the conceptualisation of children as active agents in social interactions and of (gender) socialisation as negotiation and interpretative reproduction (e.g., Baraldi, 2009; Connell, 2009; Corsaro, 2012; James, 2009; James & James, 2004; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Satta, 2012); 3) the theory of gender as an on-going interactional accomplishment, which is situationally performed and negotiated, though influenced by the gender structure (e.g., Baron & Kotthoff, 2002; Butler, 1990, 2004; Connell, 2009; Thorne, 1993); 4) the methodology of Conversation Analysis, with particular attention paid to the relevance of gender in (conflictual) interactions (e.g., Goodwin, 2002a, 2002b, 2011). Against this backdrop, in this paper gender conflicts in school settings are interpreted as communicated contradictions in which gender becomes relevant, and gender conflict ensues, through children's (and often adult's) categorisations, gendered oppositional stances, etc. Moreover, ethnocentric distinctions based on We-Identities and hierarchical positioning usually characterise and enhance gender conflicts. Finally, students' stereotyped notions of gendered behaviour enable them to build oppositional actions (re-

fusals, accusations, insults, etc.) and to challenge the counterpart; also girls, in same-sex groups or in mixed-sex groups, can display oppositional actions and practices of exclusion.

Conflict management in educational settings

As said, conflicts in schools are observed by teachers as irrelevant or as threats for the reproduction of educational communication and the achievement of its cognitive goals. Irrelevant conflicts may arise in interactions because children compete with each other for something (for example, best marks, reputation, popularity, etc.), or they disagree on objectives and forms of interaction, or even hinder or stop the personal autonomy and expression of their classmates, reinforcing the asymmetry (exclusion from the games, prevarications, bullying, violence, etc.). When interpreted as irrelevant, prevention, avoidance and diversion are often used as forms of conflict management by teachers (Baraldi & Barbieri, 2006). *Prevention* relates to forms of communication with cultural presuppositions which create conditions so that contradictions will not arise, consent will be guaranteed, the value of the group (and not of the individuals and their different opinions, experiences, feelings) will be central; *avoidance* implies communication forms with presuppositions that ignore the contradictions; *diversion* aims to draw attention to something else, in order to maintain the relationships (also asymmetrical) and to quickly find solutions.

When observed as relevant conflicts, adults are used to managing them through zero tolerance policies and regulation, or normative resolution. *Zero tolerance* addresses violent behaviour through the use of suspension or removal of the offenders from the school (e.g., Winslade & Williams, 2011), while *regulation, or normative resolution*, primarily refers to: a) a distinction and an asymmetrical distribution (linked to the role positioning) of the rights and wrongs within the conflict; b) the control of participation and selection of acceptable content within communication; c) expression of judgments, sanctions, and punishments; d) the top-down imposition of adults' perspective or school rules (see Iervese, 2007). The regulation, or normative resolution of conflict, as well as the escalation and destructive conflict, are associated to monologues, a form of communication still recurrent in education systems, as introduced above.

Recently, these forms of conflict management have appeared to be ineffective for improving classroom relationships, inclusion and equality. At the same time, differences between people are increasingly being considered in a more positive light by school administrators and teachers, and conflict is more often observed as ordinary and inevitable, a resource to be handled

effectively, and an opportunity for productive change in the existing communicative processes and within their stable patterns.

Dialogic, narrative, and transformative mediation

Against this backdrop, attention has progressively turned to *mediation*, a different way of managing conflicts, which fosters respect for differences. Principally, a mediator has: 1) a 'third' neutral (but active) position; 2) the function of promoting the parties' active participation and reflection on the conflict, of coordinating their different perspectives, of avoiding ethnocentrism and hierarchical positioning, rather stimulating personalized positioning; 3) the aim of helping the parties to find shared solutions, by meeting mutual expectations (e.g., Besemer, 1999). Though the recent spread of *peer mediation* in schools, a practice usually aimed at citizenship education, social inclusion, and students' empowerment (e.g., Cremin, 2007), conflict mediation primarily promotes children's active participation *without* cognitive and evaluation objectives, facilitates communication and mutual understanding, opens up possibilities for conflict to emerge. Moreover, conflict mediation allows the school system to tackle its own problems *through* the conflict, and not by preventing or ignoring it. Finally, it seeks new ways of handling and solving conflicts, or at least in trying to create conditions for making a conflict tractable (see Iervese, 2007).

Mediation is a system of interactions which creates the context during the communicative process and takes into account the constraints of the overall system. Then, mediation is autonomous and at the same time interdependent from the education system, which can encourage, discourage or condition mediation, but not determine its forms and results. So, what forms does communication actually take during 'conflict mediation' in schools? Which patterns of expectations are interactionally constructed, beyond the intention of mediating conflict?

Some research show that a dialogic form of mediation can have more chance of succeeding in transforming destructive and ethnocentric conflicts into productive and interpersonal conflicts (e.g., Baraldi, 2009; Baraldi & Iervese, 2010, 2017). The *dialogic mediation of conflict* aims to create within interaction cultural conditions for promoting dialogue, by enhancing the parties' active participation and self-expression, their mutual active listening, acknowledgement, appreciation, trust and respect, the coordination of their differences, their mutual understanding and/or final agreement, as well as their empowerment for finding autonomous and shared solutions. Briefly, dialogic mediators: a) facilitate the parties' active participation and coordinate their different perspectives; b) can express and narrate their own perspective; c) help the parties to overcome a stalemate or an escalation of

the conflict; d) foster an exchange of viewpoints, experiences, emotions, and feelings; e) facilitate the mutual understanding and clarification of the conflict; f) empower the parties to self-manage decisions and solutions.

The practice of dialogue has also been put forward by two other theories of mediation within and beyond education systems: the transformative and the narrative approaches. In *transformative mediation* (e.g., Baruch Bush & Folger, 1994), mediators have the task of promoting a qualitative transformation of human interaction, by following, rather than leading, the parties through the conversation, moment-by-moment, in order to identify and select opportunities for empowerment and recognition. *Narrative mediation* (e.g., Winslade & Monk, 2000, 2008; Winslade & Williams, 2011), on the other hand, highlights the important role of stories and their effects in the construction of human behaviour. In the conflict, the problem is not the individual, rather the story that creates the problem, and therefore, the conflict; so, embracing a constructivist standpoint and adopting dialogic actions, narrative mediators firstly listen to the description of the problem, secondly ask questions that externalize the problem and deconstruct the conflict-saturated story, thirdly stimulate an alternative story of their relationship, which is more peaceful and cooperative, then finally invite the parties to choose which one they wish to hold on to.

To sum up, transformative mediation and narrative mediation are enhanced by, and achieved through, dialogue. In this way, *dialogic, narrative, and transformative mediation* of gender conflicts can be interpreted as a form of communication in which the mediator, relying on dialogic actions, challenges stereotypes and bias and promotes dialogue and understanding between the parties, seeking to support and to co-construct new narratives of their relationships, based on respect for mutual differences and on equality of opportunities in choices, actions, and social roles, beyond gender expectations.

Data description

In the following sections I will present and analyse data collected through the video-recording of workshops focused on cultural and gender diversity, within two different research programs. These projects were carried out over recent years under my supervision, in multicultural and mixed-sex classes of Northern Italy.

The *first program* refers to 32 hours of interactions (2 encounters of 2 hours each) between two intercultural mediators (one man and one woman) and 8 classes (about 200 children aged 12-14) from middle schools in Modena (Italy). Intercultural mediators employed in the workshop (one per class), following a flexible trace of stimuli for discussion, were in charge of: a) in-

troducing themselves and collecting the children's expectations about the activity; b) promoting a group discussion about friends, inside and outside the class; c) narrating their personal stories: childhood, family, migration (the man from Morocco, the woman from Poland), problems, wishes and future projects; d) promoting the expression of children's personal stories and a group discussion about differences and similarities between them; e) finally, stimulating a decision-making process, aimed at choosing an image, a symbol, or a graphic representation for describing the class relationships. During this activity the vast majority of conflicts between children started in connection with gender differences, and not cultural diversity or migrant background: so, mediation was 'intercultural' only when the diversity expressed and constructed as problematic in communication was interlaced to gender.

The *second program* refers to 4 hours of interactions (2 encounters of 2 hours each) between a primary school (woman) teacher and a third grade class (25 children aged 8), in a village near to Modena (Italy). During the workshop, the teacher had the task of promoting children's active participation and reflection on stereotyped differences, dialogue, respect and friendship between classmates. In order to achieve these goals, the teacher read three short examples of classroom conversations about gender relationships (gathered from the first program) and used them as stimuli for discussion.

Considering that video-recording is a productive research technique for undertaking qualitative analysis of communicative processes in verbal and non-verbal aspects within educational contexts (e.g., Baraldi, 2009, Baraldi & Iervese, 2017) the workshops were all video-recorded with the consent of the children's parents. After their collection, data were transcribed following a simplified version of the conventions developed in Conversation Analysis (CA) by Gail Jefferson, specifically:

[text	overlapping turns
[text	
(.)	short pause (less than one second)
(..)	short pause (around one second)
(03)	length of pause in seconds
te::xt	prolonged sound
text-	interrupted turn
text –	suspended turn
<u>text</u>	high volume or emphasis
(text)	unclear turn
(??)	text not understandable
((text))	information about the context
.,?!)	rough signs for intonation in the turn

In the following presentation, and relying on the theoretical background illustrated above, I will analyse transcriptions extracted from the workshops of the two research programs mentioned. The extracts selected, translated and commented upon are not representative of the total number of interactions video-recorded within the two programs, rather they are representative of the total number of interactions in which a gender conflict and its management appeared. Although results cannot be generalised, they can provide suggestions on how adults can recognise gender conflicts and manage them, particularly through dialogic mediation, and thereby try to overcome regulation or even a zero tolerance approach, so giving children an opportunity for alternative narratives and practices, less gendered and more focused on personal differences, respect and equality.

Data analysis

Dialogic, narrative and transformative mediation of gender conflicts

The following two extracts (the first one divided into 'a' and 'b') exemplify an attempt of dialogic, narrative and transformative mediation of a gender conflict between classmates. They refer to interactions which occurred between the intercultural (man) mediator from Morocco and the children involved in the first program. On the whole, and in contrast to several studies on communication styles and gender differences, the method used by this professional appeared to be characterised more by dialogic mediation compared to those observed in conflict interactions involving his colleague from Poland and the teacher of the second research program (both women):

Extract 1a – First program, middle school

28. Mediator: but do you think that there are differences between boys and girls?
29. Marco: ye:::s!
30. Some: no:::!
31. Mediator: who says yes and who says no?
32. Marco: I say yes
33. Mediator: what differences are there?
34. Marco: you can't tell anything to a girl because then she repeats it 25 times when she sees you and if you say something in a wrong way she makes fun of you [or-
35. Rula: [they do the same thing!
36. ((*confusion coming from the boys, that are talking and laughing all together*))
37. Marco: (??) this is how girls are
38. Paolo: not all of them
39. Marco: ok, not all of them, but the majority

40. Mediator: who said no earlier? And then we are going back on what your classmate said
41. Dante: (??) differences apart from the physical aspect, maybe if there is someone that I like I prefer telling it to a boy rather than a girl
42. Mediator: so, do you all agree that there are differences between boys and girls?
43. The class: yes
44. Matteo: not for me, because when boys are talking to boys or vice versa there may be some positive and negative aspects and so boys have more freedom to speech and girls, I don't know, it is hard (?) but there are positive aspects for sure

In turns 28, 30 and 33 of extract 1a, through a yes/no question and two open questions the mediator promotes children's active participation and at the same time makes gender relevant by categorising and differentiating (boys/girls): these actions elicit a gender conflict in the subsequent turns, which display an ethnocentric form of communication based on We-Identities. In fact, turns 34 to 39 show firstly a categorisation and a critique of girls' behaviour expressed by Marco (turn 34), secondly an interruption, a categorisation and an oppositional stance voiced by Rula, who challenges Marco's account, describes the negative behaviour as typical of boys and in doing so opens up the conflict (35), confirming that girls too can take oppositional actions. Moreover, turns 34-39 show a second generalisation addressed by Marco to girls, which is partially mitigated by Paolo but confirmed by Marco again (37-39): it is a meaning negotiation, which however contains a depreciation and reproduces a negative stereotype in reference to girls. Nevertheless, the female counterpart doesn't take an oppositional stance, either spontaneously or through the encouragement of the mediator. In subsequent turns, the expert postpones the management of the gender conflict which has emerged and seeks to stimulate further contradictions, although some actions perpetuate a gendered narrative: in turn 40, he gives a voice to the students who don't see any difference between boys and girls but without going into it, while in turn 42 he tries to promote reflection and doubts about gender differences through an interrogative formulation which, however, projects overall agreement on the existence of gender differences. In the end the mediator ignores Matteo's counter-contribution, which interestingly emphasises similarities in talking to boys and girls.

Extract 1b – First program, middle school

45. Mediator: Rula was saying (.) Rula and other girls, what they said, what he said, is it true or not? Also the other girls
46. Rula: no, it is not true, because they are arrogant-
47. Fabio: thanks
48. Rula: and selfish

49. Micaela: I don't think that these distinctions should be made between boys and girls, because every person has a personality, you can't say boys are like this and girls are like that, because -
50. Mediator: she doesn't say "I feel like that because I'm a girl" but she probably feels like that not because she is a girl but because that is her personality, right? She thinks "It is her personality that distinguishes her, not because she is different from me". Do you want to say something?
51. Matteo: I also agree with Michela but I would like to respond to what Rula said, because when I used to sit next to her and I asked something to her, she never borrowed me things.
52. Rula: that is not true
53. Mediator: she is saying that it is not true, maybe -
54. Matteo: no, you ask her a pencil, an eraser, things like that and she says yes one time out of ten
55. Rula: that is not true
56. Mediator: she is saying that it is not true
57. Marco: it has to be seen how you were acting

Extract 1b highlights the development of the conflict and its management. The expert's attempt (turn 45) to encourage the girl to reply to the generalisations and accusations previously addressed by boys to their female classmates partially revitalises the contradiction. Rula in fact expresses a refusal, she disagrees (46) and provides two negative stereotypes that categorise, generalise and insult boys (46, 48), who responds sarcastically (47): therefore, the mediator's fair distribution of participation, which allows girls to have a voice within the conflict, projects an ethnocentric opposition in reply to a previous ethnocentric opposition, which was left to stand (40). At that point, Micaela's contribution (49) brings into the interaction a person-centred perspective and starts an alternative story based on I-Identities, creating a distance from gender categorisations, stereotypes, and We-identities. In turn 50, before promoting further active participation, the mediator formulates the gist of Micaela's viewpoint, trying to draw the attention of the class to personal diversity, beyond gender differences. Micaela's contribution and the mediator's dialogic actions create a partial transformation of the conflict, rather than bringing it to a conclusion: in fact, the interaction between Matteo and Rula, in which the professional simply reflects Rula's expressions in order to foster coordination between the parties, still shows a mutual refusal. However, the conflictual interaction displays now personal, instead of gender, positioning.

Extract 2 – First program, middle school

35. Mediator: for you boys is it the same, do you feel freer to talk between boys?

36. Kaled: for me it's the same, as long as I talk. Silvia doesn't say a word! Last year I was next to her and she didn't talk!
37. Lorenzo: but she talks to me
38. Mediator: so what's the problem then? Kaled, did you try to talk to her?
39. Kaled: of course I did! I tried to get her to talk but she never talked (...) I felt myself like a handicapped
40. Mediator: why wouldn't you talk, Silvia?
41. Amelita: ((stealing Silvia's turn)) I think because when boys talk they say dumb stuff
42. Lorenzo: 'cause you feel so clever, don't you?
43. Amelita: it depends on boys, not all of them (...) and then some talk, some don't (...) for example Giorgio doesn't talk, he talks there on his own, because he's shy with girls but not with the other boys
44. Mediator: is it right what she's saying, in your opinion?
45. Giorgio: yeah, I feel freer to talk to boys
46. Valeria: I took Giulio's place and so I'm usually next to boys. Boys are annoying because even when you want to say something, maybe that you're excited about something they say "why should I care!?" and then when they tell you "you know, today I'm buying a new pair of shoes" you try to show a little interest because they're happy and so I tell him "oh really? Are you happy? where are you buying them?" but when it's me telling that, he says "why should I care about what you do!?" I mean (.) sometimes you can feel a bit (.) he's never caring about you!
47. Lorenzo: po::r gi:rl!!
48. Kaled: but she talks too much!
49. Valeria: you're not there among them
50. Mediator: so, your classmate is saying that she shows interest for your matters but she doesn't see the same on your side
51. Kaled: it's not true!
52. Mediator: let's try to think about why she sees you in this way: have you ever thought about it? (04) Nothing? Are you telling me it's not true and that's all? Well, next time we'll go on in this

In turn 35 of extract 2, the mediator (the same as in extract 1a and 1b), fosters a fair distribution of participation, inviting boys to self-express, but also categorising them as well. However, in this case, the categorisation doesn't elicit a gender conflict as seen in extract 1a, but rather an interpersonal one. In fact, Kaled and Lorenzo (turns 36, 37) tell about their experience with Silvia and the mediator promotes Kaled's reflection, probably in order to externalise the problem and to understand the boy's behaviour (38). After Kaled's reply in the form of a personal narrative (39), the professional seeks to coordinate the contributions by inviting Silvia to explain her personal reasons (40). At that point, the interaction turns into a gender conflict, based on categorisation and an ethnocentric monologue: first of all, Amelita's gener-

alisation and criticism of boys (41) elicit Lorenzo's sarcastic response to the girl who had started the conflict (42); after that, in turn 43 Amelita attempts to mitigate her previous accusation by initiating a narrative in which she renounces her generalised criticism and tries to bring the conflict back to an interpersonal level, by describing personal differences in boys' behaviour. The subsequent yes/no question of the mediator (44) elicits Giorgio's explanation of the motivation related to his different behaviour with boys and girls (45). This last contribution, that more or less implicitly conveys a negative message to girls, initiates a third phase of the conflict, in this case interpersonal: Valeria opens with quite a long narrative in which gender generalisation and interpersonal orientation are mixed up with oppositional stances (46); Lorenzo (as in turn 42) displays a sarcastic confrontational response (47), while Kaled makes an accusation (48), both addressed to Valeria, who rejects the boys' contributions (49). In turn 49, the mediator formulates the meaning expressed by Valeria, and after Kaled's refusal, seeks to foster reflection and empathy among the boys (50): these actions, however, are not sufficiently effective in stimulating further personal expressions, clarification or understanding, and after a pause of 4 seconds the mediator changes the topic and appears to avoid managing the conflict.

Extract 3, drawn from the second research program and involving the teacher from the primary school, shows other ways in which a) gender categorisations and oppositions, expressed by the adult, can bring about conflict and b) dialogic actions can help the mediation practice in countering generalisations and initiating an alternative story of the relationships between children:

Extract 3 – Second program, primary school

50. Teacher: Now I'll ask the boys: do girls talk about topics you are not at all interested in?
51. Boys all together: sometimes yes
52. Teacher: but are there topics that annoy you?
53. Boys all together: ((*laughter*)) well they always talk about girls' things!
54. Girls all together: yes, but you do that as well!
55. Teacher: hold on! But what are these boys' or girls' things? I don't know them! What annoys you?
56. Francesco: they always talk about Winx!!
57. Girls all together: no:.....!! ((*background laughter*))
58. Teacher: hey!!! Let's keep talking one at a time (..) and what do boys talk about instead?
59. Pamela: they talk about Dragon Ball!!
60. Boys all together: ((*laughter*)) no:.....!!
61. Teacher: ok, ok. Let's keep talking one at a time. What else annoys you? Is there any other topic that annoys you?

62. Antonio: the fact that girls talk only about Daniele!
63. Teacher: about whom? About Daniele? Who's Daniele? May I ask?
64. Boys all together: a boy in fifth grade!!
65. Laura: but not all of them!!!
66. Teacher: but not all of them. As is the case in our story (..) not all of them. Antonio is telling us that he is the least interested in staying with the girls if they only talk about Daniele and how good-looking he is (..) ok!
67. Antonio: that's right!

In the first part of extract 3, all the teacher's contributions (turns 50, 52, 55, 58, 61) stimulate and vitalise the conflict between classmates, both by (re) producing gender categorisations and oppositions, and by promoting a fair distribution of participation between children. Here conflict seems to be an exchange of refusals, however with less ethnocentric oppositions and accusations than those analysed above. In the second part of the extract, Laura's opposition and challenge of the generalisation addressed by boys to girls (67) is selected and relaunched by the teacher to the class through two echoes (66); in the same turn, the adult formulates Antonio's viewpoint seeking to promote the girls' understanding and dialogue between boys and girls.

Regulation of gender conflicts

During the workshops carried out within the two programs, only one case of regulation, or normative resolution, of gender conflicts occurred. We can observe it in the following example:

Extract 4 - First program, middle school

31. ((*confusion and conflict between boys and girls*))
32. Mediator: guys, is your class always divided in two sides? Boys on one side and girls on the other?
33. Paolo: yes
34. Giulio: no
35. Andrea: I wish!
36. Enzo: girls are too much ballbusters
37. Andrea: it is better to stay this way rather than with someone like Kadija that –
38. Artur: I get along with everyone but mostly with boys
39. ((*a lot of confusion, boys are talking all together and the mediator is silent for a bit*))
40. Mediator: ok, can I talk? Guys, now that you have so much energy, you talk all together, I put you at work
41. Enzo: no:::
42. Mediator: you can finally talk all together, since you won't let me attend, now you have to think, I give you a big white sheet of paper, think of representing your class according to your opinion, think about a symbol that may represent your class

In extract 4, the mediator (a woman, from Poland) firstly allows the gender conflict to be expressed and developed, secondly she asks a yes/no question in order to verify the recurrence of gender separation and opposition in the class (turn 32). In the subsequent turns (33-38) only boys take the floor and the majority of them define the separation as positive and make offensive comments about the girls. After some confusion and overlaps among the boys, instead of exploring these oppositions further and promoting the active participation of the girls within the conflict, the mediator chooses to regulate it in a normative, monological and asymmetrical way, by using sarcasm and giving them a task as a punishment (40, 42).

Ambivalent forms of conflict management

While during the workshops of the classes no relevant episodes of gender conflict avoidance were observed, this was not the case for interactions with ambivalences between dialogic mediation (and facilitation), normative resolution and education aimed at promoting mutual respect.

Extract 5 – Second program, primary school

66. Katia: if there is one thing that I don't like about guys is that they lie to much ((*talking to her seatmate*))
67. Teacher: good. Attention because this something that can make us think. So, Katia said that something like that happened to her
68. Katia: yes, because they wanted to fend off and in the end we took the blame!
69. Paolo: this is not true! No!
70. Teacher: and the girls are sure that they don't lie?
71. Some girls: but yes::!
72. Other girls: no::!
73. Roberta: we lie every two seconds!
74. Teacher: I believe that lies or justifications that leads us to get out in the right way (.) I believe that they don't depend on the gender, on boys or girls, but it's typical of all persons
75. Marco: Laura always lies ((*talking to Laura*))
76. Laura: come on, go ahead, give me an example! Come on!
77. Katia: like the other day when you told me that you didn't do something, but you actually did it!
78. Laura: but I can explain it to you!
79. Teacher: good, in this way we understand that lies and excuses are not only typical in male but also in female
80. Laura: but I can tell you something, Katia (.) I would have done so, in fact I was turning around
81. Katia: no! But you did it!!
82. Laura: ((*putting her hand on her chest as when you swear*)) I did it (..) I did it, but I don't remember what I did!! Maybe in that moment I was really angry and I just did it

83. Teacher: Katia is saying something really important (..) that when we are in a group we have to be sincere, both boys and girls have to be sincere and admit what has been done (.) Laura is admitting that she did something wrong and she is saying sorry

The first part of extract 5 (turns 66-74) shows an interaction in which the teacher facilitates communication, promotes reflection and doubts about generalisations and stereotypes, mediates an initial gender conflict characterised by categorisations and ethnocentrism. This work, which is done by the teacher through dialogic actions such as appreciation and formulation (66), and self-expression of her point of view on the relevance of person over gender (74), in the subsequent turns (75-78) elicits a development and a transformation of the contradiction between boys and girls into an interpersonal conflict which involves the girls more so than the boys. In the last part of the extract, however, the interaction appears to display educational presuppositions, in which the teacher, through formulations (79, 83), creates cognitive expectations on the importance of learning and practising the values of honesty and sincerity in groups between classmates and friends. The actions of the teacher do not project a reply from the children, as already observed in extract 4.

Extract 6 – Second program, primary school

20. Teacher: let's listen to Paolo
21. Paolo: I don't like sitting next to girls (.) I don't like sitting next to Laura, Roberta – ((*pointing them*))
22. Teacher: no but I don't want names!! Why don't you like sitting next to girls?
23. Paolo: their chattering bothers me, they talk too much! And if I say stop they rumble
24. Sara: but you do the same!
25. Chiara: but you guys never do it?!
26. Paolo: I only say one thing: girls have an attitude (..) we are better! Like Laura she has an attitude that –
27. Laura: come on, so give me an example!
28. Paolo: ((*she blows a raspberry*))
29. Laura: but I tell you something (..) keep calm because we don't talk while we are working
30. Paolo: yes, I can admit that but (..) you disturb!
31. Teacher: good. So, you are saying that it is not about boys or girls but about how a person behaves!
32. Giulia: teacher, teacher, can I ask Albano something?
33. Teacher: of course!

In extract 6, the gender categorisation carried out by the teacher (turn 22) elicits an ethnocentric gender conflict (23-30), based on accusations, counter-accusations, and the expression of differences of value between

boys and girls. In turn 31, the teacher (like in extract 5) doesn't mediate the contradiction, rather she provides a summary formulation which ignores the children's contributions and reiterates her perspective (already revealed in extract 5) on the relevance of personal uniqueness in spite of gender differences.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Combining a systemic and constructivist approach to communication and conflict, with notions taken from dialogue studies and mediation studies (mainly, dialogic actions and dialogic, narrative and transformative mediation), with a gender perspective that intersects the performative approach and Conversation Analysis, my general objective was to show the ways in which conflicts among classmates display a gender dimension, the forms of communication for the management of gender conflicts and the effects of these forms on children's participation.

As already said, results cannot be generalised, however they can provide some indications on how adults can recognise and manage gender conflicts, and in particular mediate them dialogically. The idea is therefore to suggest ways in which regulation or even a zero tolerance approach can be overcome, and children can have a chance to produce new narratives and practices connected to their relationships, which are less gendered and more focused on personal differences, respect and equality.

With regards to conflicts, the evidence presented partially confirms certain assumptions mentioned in the theoretical background. First of all, gender becomes relevant in interactions, and gender conflict breaks out, through children's categorisations, generalisations, stereotypes, gendered oppositional stances, etc. (extracts 1a and 1b); nevertheless, categorisations are frequently expressed by the mediator and the teacher (all extracts analysed) and categorisations can elicit interpersonal conflicts as well (extract 2). Secondly, ethnocentric distinctions based on We-Identities and hierarchical positioning usually characterise and enhance the gender conflicts analysed (extracts 1a, 1b, 6); however, the ethnocentric dimension can be also mitigated or ignored (extract 3). Thirdly, students' stereotyped notions of gendered behaviour enable them to build oppositional actions (refusals, accusations, insults, etc.) and to challenge the counterpart (all extracts considered). Fourthly, girls in same-sex groups or in mixed-sex groups either display oppositional stances (extracts 5) or do not react to accusations and insults (extracts 1a and 4), thereby challenging or reproducing the male dominated gender hierarchy.

Turning to the forms of communication used in order to manage gender conflicts and their effects on children's participation, the analysis has shown

that dialogic, narrative and transformative mediation, or an attempt of it (extracts 1-3), was the major form carried out by the intercultural mediators and the teacher, in charge of the workshops in the two research programs considered. While regulation, or normative resolution, was observed only once (extract 4) with its negative connotations (distinction and asymmetrical distribution of the rights and wrongs within the conflict, without promoting coordination and understanding of different perspectives, control of participation and selection of acceptable content within the communication; expression of judgements, sanctions, and punishments; top-down imposition of adults' perspective or school rules; children's withdrawal from communication), an alternative way for managing disagreements was a form of interaction with mixed cultural presuppositions, which displayed an ambivalence between dialogic mediation and education to respectful relationships (extracts 5 and 6). This evidence confirms that, on the whole, dialogic approaches in managing conflicts are appealing and that dialogic mediation fosters children's active participation and self-expression (opinions, experiences, feelings, narratives, stereotypes, etc.), whereas introducing expectations of learning, positioning as roles, and correctness as value appear to control and discourage children's contributions and agency in interaction.

A specific purpose of this paper was to draw the attention of scholars and professionals towards the practice of mediation in managing gender conflict among classmates. Even if dialogue studies and mediation studies are increasingly considering dialogic, and narrative and transformative, mediation as a promising form of conflict management between students in comparison with other forms (i.e. prevention, avoidance, normative resolution, zero tolerance), its use and effects for gender conflicts have not yet been sufficiently investigated. Maybe, the presented analysis can be of help in pursuing this line of research. With regards to positive aspects and potentialities, the evidence highlights that dialogic actions – in particular a fair distribution of participation, open questions, alternative questions, echoes, appreciations, formulations, and self-expressions – can: 1) allow the conflict to be expressed and become more intense, 2) foster dialogue and clarification between the parties, 3) elicit a development and a transformation of a gender conflict into an interpersonal one, 4) challenge gender generalisations and stereotypes, and support or initiate alternative stories of personal diversity, beyond gender differences.

Turning to problems, apart from those which have already been pointed out about the ambivalences which exist between dialogic mediation and education, there is need to reflect upon the use of gender categorisations by the adult responsible for the workshop. On one side, their use allows the conflict to emerge and manifest itself; on the other, when not followed by dialogic actions that effectively select and enhance perspectives and narratives on

personal diversity beyond gender, the categorisations expressed by the adult risk supporting and perpetuating children's gendered representations and reproducing narratives of gender binary and hierarchy, affecting the management and fuelling the conflict. Another aspect worthy of consideration, and connected to the promotion of empowerment and recognition within the conflict, is the adult's occasional difficulty in following, rather than leading or ignoring, the parties through the conversation, moment-by-moment, in selecting and relaunching for the discussion the children's contributions that counter gender stereotypes and narrate personal differences. Finally, though conflict mediation was enhanced by dialogic actions and the adult was able to listen to the parties, and to their descriptions of the problems (different personalities, lack of sensitivity, silences, lies, etc.), it's hard to conclude that the sole use of dialogic mediation, over such a limited period of time, succeeded in promoting a qualitative transformation of gender interactions in the classes involved in the programs. Given the important role stories play in human actions, maybe it would be useful for future similar workshops, to place more attention on the co-production of narratives and then to invite the parties to choose which narrative they wish to hold on to: the conflict-saturated story or an alternative, more respectful, cooperative, and peaceful story?

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