Sorting pupils in a report-card meeting: Categorization in a situated activity system*

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Abstract

The teaching team that we examine during a report-card meeting works with a finely tuned measurement system for accountably deciding on pupils' future school careers. A substantial part of the sorting work is routinized and is based upon pupil results produced during the school year. But there are also pupils with overall scores that set them in a discussion zone. The discussions about such disputable cases are not only revealing as to what kind of criteria the teachers use for assessing pupils, they also make observable the descriptive practices the teaching team uses for granting access to higher-level schools within the highly differentiated high-school system in the Netherlands. We examine a descriptive practice the teachers use for characterizing a pupil in order to take a position in the discussion about which school type suits him best. The focus is on membership-categorization practices that typify pupils and on the criteria that account for membership-category ascription. We show that the way the teachers cast their assessments of pupils has to be analyzed within the situated activity system that organizes the decision making in the report-card meeting.

Keywords: *descriptive practice; categorization; situated activity system; community of practice; sorting pupils; teaching team meeting; applied conversation analysis.*

1. Introduction

Some years ago, we were allowed to make audio recordings of teaching-team meetings in two mid-level high schools in the Netherlands. The meeting data were collected as part of a larger project in which the primary focus was on the investigation of the influence of sociocultural and ethnic background in classroom interaction (cf. Deen et al. forthcoming).[1]

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In an earlier study of the meeting data, we examined some of the descriptive practices the teachers use to discuss students (cf. Berenst and Mazeland forthcoming). We observed, for example, how the teaching team in one school was strongly oriented toward the solving of problems with pupils in the behavorial domain, whereas the team in the other school was focused more strongly on cognitive skills. The teaching team in the latter school differentiated between types of cognitive abilities. They valued a pupil's ability to develop understanding and insight more highly than the ability to imitate and to reproduce knowledge. These competences are ranked in such a way that the level of cognitive skill was consequential for the decision-making process about a pupil's school career. In the staff meetings, the teachers negotiate assessments of pupils, but this does not mean that the team decides about pupils on an ad hoc basis. Teacher judgments about pupils unfold within a discursive history of ways of interacting with and talking about pupils and they are shaped by common ways of looking at and dealing with pupils. The work of a team of teachers can be appropriately conceptualized as a *community of practice* (Wenger 1998). Teachers collaborate in teams to pursue joint enterprises and they accumulate over time a *repertoire* of negotiable resources. They share teaching materials and models of teaching methods, ways of making spatial and temporal arrangements, tools, procedures, terminologies, action formats, and modes of interaction organization—all as resources for cooperatively doing their job in manageable, accommodable, and accountable ways. In this paper, we examine a single component of one such repertoire, a membership categorization device that the team of teachers in one school uses in promotion discussions about pupils' career. We will analyze this device in detail, because we want to show how it is shaped with a view toward the work that is done with it, the task of sorting pupils. The analysis illustrates that the linguistic repertoire of a community of practice such as the teaching team contains descriptive systems that are adapted to the work that is done with it and that provide a shared framework for situated, task-oriented, sense-making practices.

2. Characterizing pupils

Teacher characterizations of pupils and how such descriptive practices influence pupils' careers have been studied before (cf. Leiter 1974; Cedersund and Svensson 1996; and Baker 1997).[2] People have various sorts of linguistic devices available to describe a person (cf. Sacks 1972a, 1972b; and Jayyusi 1984). A speaker may assign a person to a type (e.g., 'high-school pupil', 'repeaters' [of a school year], 'first-grader', 'sweet darling',

'conceited fob'), s/he may describe a feature of that person (e.g., 'he works regularly', 'he has a language deficit'), s/he may characterize the state or stage he is in ('he's growing', '(. . .) has collapsed completely'), s/he may ascribe attitudes ('diligent', 'tricky'), s/he may assess that person in terms of a scale ('very weak', 'reasonable', 'he doesn't organize his things well enough'), s/he may provide a report on this person (e.g., give a list of marks, tell about a development, or make a comparison), s/he may tell a story that supports some implied judgment, etc. In the meeting data, a discussion of a pupil often includes a combination of various types of 'descriptive practices' (cf. Bergmann 1991). Compare the following extract from a discussion in the report-card meeting about one of the pupils, Fabienne. The team discusses the option of promoting her to the second year of a higher-level type of secondary school (HAVO) instead of a more routine promotion to the second year of a mid-level type of secondary school (MAVO). NL is the teacher of Dutch:[3]

(1)

1 →	NL:	*ze*: *e:h* (0.4) *doet 't heel redelijk*,
		she u:h is doing very reasonably,
2		2.1
3 →		*maar dan moet ze 'n aantal e:h* (0.9)
		but then she has to do a number u:h-
4		*dan haalt ze eh hoog cijfer voor 'n proefwerk*,
		one time she gets a high grade for a test,
5		*vervolgens moet ze iets met 'n eh boekverslag*
		and then she has to do something with a book review
6		*'n spree:kbeurt*, (1.2) *en da:n zou je juist bij*
		a presentation, and then you would expect certainly
7		*hAA:r verwachte dat 't 'r goed uit zou ko:me*, (1.1)
		in her case that she would make a good job of it
8		*en dat valt dan tege.*
		and then the result is disappointing
9		2.3
10 →		*dus van eh nou ga je le:hre*, (0.2) *en dan weet je*
		so like uh now you have to learn, and then you know
11		*wat 'r precies wat op je AFkomt*, (0.3) >*dan haalt*
		exactly what you will be faced with, then she is
12		*ze het wel,*< *en* (*dan*:) *wijk je daarvan af*
		making it indeed and (then) you depart from this
13		*dan wordt het moeilijk voor d'r.*
		then it becomes difficult for her.
14		1.4

15 → *dus ik denk dat ze 'n goeie MA:vo leerling is.*
so I think she is a good MAVO pupil.

After a concessive *assessment* of how she is doing in general ('very reasonably', line 1), the Dutch teacher contrasts this seemingly positive judgment by *reporting* a type of experience that is incompatible with it (line 3). He then *explains* the discrepancy in terms of different types of cognitive abilities (line 10). Fabienne is doing reasonably well as long as she knows what to expect, but she fails as soon as a task becomes less routine. The argument is concluded with a summary assessment in which the pupil is characterized in terms of a school-type *category* ('so I think she is a good MAVO pupil', line 15; MAVO is the mid-level type of high school).

The teachers report, they assess, they analyze and explain, and they categorize. Within the range of this palette, categorization is the most unconcealed typifying technique. Categorizing a person as an incumbent of a social role or position—that is, ascribing him or her to a *membership category*—has a strongly reifying impact. It may ratify the transfer of traits associated with the type to individual incumbents. A person can be ascribed to a membership category by reference to a single or a few attributes, as the Dutch teacher does in Extract (1) when he characterizes Fabienne as *a good MAVO pupil* on the basis of an observation about her cognitive skills. Once there is agreement upon the type, category-specific knowledge may be used as a resource for assigning characteristics of the type to individual representatives. Berenst and Mazeland (forthcoming) show, for example, how teachers manage to maintain a characterization of a pupil in spite of possibly contrastive evidence. They do so by agreeing upon explanations by specific reason (such as *he simply didn't learn it*) instead of resorting to explanations that assign a pupil to a cognitive type (such as *very weak*).

The members of a culture or a community organize membership categories in collections. Such collections may be ordered so that knowing which collection a membership category comes from allows for inferences about both the sociostructural role of an incumbent and about the ways s/he relates to representatives of other categories in the collection. We make social order by seeing the world that surrounds us in terms of interactions between incumbents of structurally related categories from the same membership-categorization collection. We describe and explain the actions people do in terms of the membership categories they are seen to be an incumbent of. Membership-categorization collections plus the rules that are used for applying and relating categories can be conceptualized analytically as *membership categorization devices* (MCDs; cf. Sacks 1972a, 1972b). MCDs are the basic form in which we cast our everyday

sociological reasoning. The orientation to the ordering of membership categories in the relevant device normatively guides the way we act and talk in the social world (see also Levinson 2005).

Membership-categorization devices are not only used for describing and evaluating the social world, in some situations they also are deployed for registering category membership. Cultures and communities often have elaborate, standardized procedures for accomplishing transition of membership category. The MCDs that are used for this typically consist of a collection of categories that is hierarchically ordered so that transition from one membership category to another one in the same collection is seen as either a kind of promotion or a kind of demotion. The report-card meeting from which our data come is part of one such procedure. When a teacher in the report-card meeting describes a pupil as, for example, a good MAVO pupil, as is documented in Extract (1), this may be a move in the process in which a student actually *becomes* a MAVO pupil. This is really a 'constitutive' use of the membership category.

A remarkable outcome of our investigation of the descriptive practices that are used in the report-card meeting is that the teachers do not often characterize a pupil by using a school-type based membership category such as *MAVO pupil* or *HAVO pupil*. The team almost seems to avoid characterizing pupils in terms of the membership category to which the pupil in question may be assigned as the result of the decision that is taken about him (see Berenst and Mazeland forthcoming). This shows that the teachers discuss pupils very carefully. They avoid typifications that foreground dispreferred evaluations of a pupil's competence. Instead, they resort to empirically accessible characterizations of pupils that may account for the decision that is taken about the pupil in question by specific, person-bound attributes and reasons. At the same time, this skewed distribution of practices for characterizing pupils shows that talk about pupils is guided by situated, activity-related norms, primarily with respect to how the activity of deciding about pupils is done in an accountable way.

3. Categorization in a situated activity system

Our core data are the audio recording and the transcription of a report-card meeting of a high-school teaching team in the Netherlands. In this meeting, the teachers decide on the future career of the pupils from a *brugklas* (literally: 'bridging class') in a mid-range type of high school. The *brugklas* is the first general year in secondary school. The pupils are prepared for either the second grade in MAVO (mid-level secondary

school) or the second grade in HAVO (higher-level secondary school).[4] If a pupil is not promoted to MAVO-2 or to HAVO-2, and s/he is given the advice to look for another school, this usually comes down to a continuation of the school career in a trade school for practical vocational training.

In the final report-card meeting of the school year, the teachers have to decide on the future school career of each pupil from the class they have been teaching together. Apart from the two teachers who are not present, all subject teachers are there (11 in total). Like many other kinds of communities of practice in the domain of professional work, the teaching team that gathers in the report-card meeting is not a very stable group. Its composition changes every year. The stability of the community's operating mode is partially warranted by an inventory of procedures that are imposed, imported, developed, and adapted over the course of years by partially overlapping groups of teachers in a dynamic, almost permanently changing institutional and political environment. As a part of the community's repertoire, it is archived in both the memory and the working styles of individual members and in various sorts of regulations, documents, reports, notes, or formats for communicating outcomes (cf. Linde 1999).

The math teacher is chairing the meeting. He already prepared a spreadsheet with an overview of the pupils' end results for each separate subject and a summary score that is used in the measurement system for allocating pupils. In the beginning of the meeting, he also outlines the rules and procedures the team is supposed to orient to. His résumé is not only refreshing the memories of the current members of the team; it also serves as instruction for a novice member who is attending the meeting in preparation of full participation in the next school year. In order to give an impression of the way the chair recapitulates the rules of the game, some selected fragments from this episode are rendered below. Because we only want to give an impression of the content of the chair's contribution, we present the translation only. We have also taken out other contributions to the interaction (next to acknowledgements and continuers, this concerned mostly brief questions about how to do or where to find something):

(2) 'Well the norm, the norm is as follows: add up all scores in the lowest row, (. . .) then you get a total score,[5] (. . .) And then you subtract the insufficient scores, (. . .) this goes as always. An insufficient grade for the final-diploma subjects, two points etcetera. An insufficient grade for the non-diploma subjects one point less etcetera, (. . .) This way you get a total score (. . .) and then I look here on the

> blackboard at my right and then you can find it back (. . .) at a total score of 96 or more it is automatically HAVO, then we get the discussion zone between MAVO and HAVO, and between 77 and 88 MAVO-2. Discussion zone MAVO-2 and below 70 or lower we do not allow a promotion anymore. (. . .) U::h (. . .) the procedures. So there are different kinds of procedures. Let's start with the most negative one. Somebody who has less than 70 points, (. . .) we can forbid to repeat.' (The chair then lists the conditions for forbidding repeat of the bridging class: The parents have to be given notice beforehand in a letter and at least two-thirds of the teachers should agree that the pupil in question is not suited for MAVO.)

Despite the fact that the norms and the procedures are clearly displayed as rules that are man-made, negotiable, ad hoc, provisional, and still in development, they do present more or less standardized guidelines for how to do the work. In his résumé, the math teacher reinstalls the measurement system according to which the pupils will be assessed. The sorting rules are summarized in Table 1.

Pupils with a summary score that automatically permits promotion to MAVO-2 or HAVO-2 are usually not discussed any further. The chair handles them as a formality. Extract (3) provides an example of a case of routine allocation to MAVO-2:

(3)

1	MA:	*Jeroen X* (0.8) *e:hm* (1.2) (°m:) *met 'n hele*
		Jeroen X u:hm (m:) came in with a very
2		*mooie Citoscore binnen gekomen. MAVO HAVO advies.*
		nice CITO-score.[6] MAVO HAVO advice.
3		(1.0)
4		*hij komt op negenenzeventig punten uit.*
		he sums up to 79 points.
5		*en dat is e:h* (0.6) *njah, meer dan (mavo twee).*
		and this is u:h well, more than (MAVO-2).

Table 1. *The standardized measurement system for allocating pupils*

Pupil score		Allocation
96 or more	→	Promotion to HAVO-2
89–95	→	Discussion zone HAVO-2
77–88	→	Promotion to MAVO-2
71–76	→	Discussion zone MAVO-2
70 or less	→	Discussion about repeating the *brugklas*

6 *dus eh* (.) *hij is gewoon bevorderd.*
so uh he is simply promoted.

Extract (4) provides an example of allocation to a discussion zone. The chair first summarizes how the pupil's overall score is calculated (line 2). He then states the classification to which this score leads (line 3):

(4)
1 MA: *OPGETeld*, (0.3) *negenenzeventig,* (0.6) *vijf onvoldoende*
in total, ((a score of))) 79 ((points)), minus 5 points for
2 → *punten er af,* (0.7) *komt ie in vierenzeventig terecht,*
insufficient subject scores, which sets him at 74,
3 → *en dat is 'n bepree:kzone* (0.9) *mavo twee.*
and that's a discussion zone MAVO-2.

The 'actual' work of discussing pupils in the report-card meeting is organized in the following way. Each pupil is discussed in the order in which s/he is listed on the spreadsheet. The chair first summarizes the score of the pupil in question and then indicates how this pupil should be discussed according to the sorting rules summarized in Table 1. If the sorting rules put a pupil into a discussion zone, the chair mentions this and opens the discussion (see Extract [5] below).

In principle, all teachers may contribute to the discussion round in which they decide on a disputable case. The order in which they contribute is not fixed beforehand. The chair may select the first and the next contributors, but he may also wait until one of his colleagues self-selects. When the chair selects a particular colleague as the first one to speak about a pupil, this is sometimes because this teacher has some relevant experiences with or responsibilities for the pupil. When nobody volunteers anymore, or after ample discussion, the chair summarizes the position that most or all of the team members seem to support, and lets them vote about it. He then formulates the official outcome for the pupil in question and goes on with the next pupil on the list. The team discusses 28 pupils in total; it makes 28 times the same run through the procedure of deciding about a pupil. In 15 cases, the pupil in question is promoted in a routine way. In the remaining cases, there is ample discussion.

A more or less regular type of interactionally organized activity like the discussion about the pupils in the report-card meeting may be conceptualized appropriately with the notion of a *situated activity system*. Goffman (1961: 95–96) developed this concept to describe repetitive encounters in social establishments in which an individual is brought

into face-to-face interaction with others for the performance of a single joint activity, a somewhat closed, self-compensating, self-terminating circuit of interdependent actions. (Goffman 1961: 95–96)

The discussion rounds in the report-card meeting comprise an ordered series of going through the same activity in a regular, partially prestructured way. Each round begins with the total score of a pupil and it ends with the sorting decision that is taken about him or her. The formats that are used in the course of the decision-making process are available in a way that is not tied to the properties of a particular case, both with respect to the interactional organization of the *participation framework* (cf. Goffman 1981) and regarding the measurement system, the norms and procedures that are used for regulating the decision making in the final report-card meeting. The activity system packages and structures a range of elements in the repertoire of the community of practice (cf. Goodwin 1997: 115). It provides a *mode of interactional organization* (cf. Schegloff 1987) that the teachers orient to when shaping their contributions to the discussion. It helps to understand what a teacher is doing when s/he is talking about a pupil in a specific way. The orientation to the activity system also explains how a seemingly neutral, descriptive term like *MAVO pupil* can be used for taking a position in the decision-making process about a pupil. When the teachers in the report-card meeting use the categories *MAVO pupil* or *HAVO pupil*, they do not use them to refer only descriptively to a member of a category. Within the framework of the activity system in which the teachers have to make a decision about a disputable case, a categorization of a pupil as a *MAVO* or *HAVO pupil* is a practice for taking a position in the discussion. Compare the context of Extract (1) in which the Dutch teacher characterizes Fabienne as 'a good MAVO pupil'. His contribution is an answer to the question whether she should be promoted to HAVO:

(5)

1 →	MA:	*FAbi<u>E</u>nne.*
2		0.9
3 →		*be<u>vor</u>deringspre- bespr<u>e</u>king ↓HA:vo twee.*
		promotion cus- discussion HAVO-2
4		0.8
5		°*dus*:° (.) *eh g- <u>gaa</u>n we weer:.*
		so uh th- there we go again.
6		0.9
7		*<u>H</u>Avo twee.*
		HAVO-2.
8		2.2

9		*u*::*h*,
10		3.4 ((pages are turned around))
11 →		>*kan <u>di</u>t meisje naar havo twe<u>e</u>*.<
		can this girl go to HAVO-2
12		5.6
13 →	NL	*ik* (0.7) *<u>de</u>nk 't niet.*
		I don't think so.
14		1.4
15	NL:	*ze*: *eh* (0.4) *<u>do</u>et 't heel redelijk,* (2.1) *maar* (. . .)
		she u:h is doing very reasonably, but . . .

((NL continues with an exposé about Fabienne's shortcomings, see Extract [1]))

In the beginning of this fragment, the chair launches the next run through the decision-making system by mentioning the name of the pupil who is to be discussed next (line 1). After having registered that Fabienne is in the discussion zone for HAVO-2 (line 3), he invites his colleagues to take position by asking them to answer the question whether she can go to HAVO-2 (line 11). The Dutch teacher's position is that he thinks she cannot (line 13), and at the end of his contribution, he summarizes his position by assessing her as 'a good MAVO pupil' (see Extract [1]).

Within the local sequential context of the decision-making system in the report-card meeting, this assessment works as a positive way of stating that Fabienne should be promoted only to MAVO-2, not to HAVO-2. The measurement system and the sorting rules are designed so that the discussion of a disputable case is always shaped as a decision about mutually exclusive alternatives. If a pupil is determined as a disputable case according to the sorting device (see Table 1), the teaching team has only two options. In the case of Fabienne, whose total score sets her in the discussion zone for HAVO-2, the choice is between promotion to MAVO-2 or to HAVO-2 (the higher type of high school). When the Dutch teacher describes Fabienne as a good exemplar of the category of MAVO pupils, the binary design of the decision-making system provides the basis for making the inference that he thinks she is not eligible for promotion to HAVO-2.

4. Selecting between alternative categorizations for taking the same position

The situated activity system for making decisions about a pupil in the final report-card meeting of the bridging class thus provides the framework

within which the characterization of a pupil in terms of school-type membership categories is interpreted. In the preceding section, we have seen that categorizing a pupil as *a good MAVO pupil* is used as a practice for taking a position against promotion to HAVO. This way of casting one's position is a positively formulated way of pleading for promotion to the 'lower' alternative of promotion to MAVO-2 and for turning down the more generous option. The very same position—opting for the lower alternative—can also be expressed as a negative statement. A teacher may signal disapproval of promotion to HAVO-2 by an assessment of the type *X is not a HAVO pupil*. This type of assessment is formulated in terms of school-type category membership as well. However, it is not done by asserting category incumbency as in the case of *a good MAVO pupil*, but by denying incumbency of the alternative membership category (HAVO pupil). Compare the extract below from the discussion round about Claudia, who is also a disputable case in discussion zone HAVO-2. The math teacher concludes his contribution to the discussion by stating that he thinks that Claudia 'is absolutely not a HAVO pupil' (line 18):

(6)

1 →	MA:	*e:h* (2.2) *ik vinn't zElf helema↑al*: *geen HAVO twee*
		u:h I myself think this is no HAVO-2 at all.
2		1.5
3 →		(°*jah m*:-°) (1.0) *ze ze haalt e:h net aan*
		(yes w-) she she only gets a sufficient
4		'*n voldoende om*: *dat ze* (0.9) *e:h werkstukken*)
		grade because she u:h does assignments
5		*samen met Quincy maakt.* (1.7)
		together with Quincy.
6		*en dan doet* [*ze goed 'r BEst*:,]
		and then she does her best,
7	EN:	[*en die is d'r tehgeh*?]
		and you think she is against it?
8	MA:	*en dan lukt dat*, (.) °*dan e:h*°
		and it works then, then u:h
9 →		*zo gauw 't 'n BEETJE inzichtelijk is*:,
		as soon as a little bit of insight is required,
10		(*dan*) *haakt ze echt helemaal af*:.
		(then) she really drops out completely.
11		1.2
12		*dan haalt ze* (*d'r eh*-) (0.3) >*ze kan vieren halen.*<
		then she (it uh-) she can get fours.

13		(° *voor haar werkstukken*.) (0.5)
		(for her assignments.)
14	Tf:	[*ja,*
		yes,
15 →	MA:	[*waar anderen negens voor halen*.
		where others get nines.
16		1.0
17		*dus ehm*: (0.3)
		so uhm
18 →		*ik vind 't dus totaal*: *geen HAvo*:*leerling*.
		I think she is absolutely not a HAVO pupil.

Very similar to the way the assertion of incumbency of the MAVO category counts as taking a position against promotion to HAVO-2 in the case of *a good MAVO pupil*, the denial of category incumbency for the other option is used as an alternative for conveying the same opinion. Both types of assessments are used as a practice for taking the same position on a disputable case in discussion zone HAVO-2.

The selection of one or the other alternative does not correlate with the way the teacher in question builds his argument. Note, for example, that the math teacher's contribution in the extract above strongly resembles the earlier discussed contribution of the Dutch teacher in the discussion round about Fabienne (see Extracts [1] and [5]). The two contributions are very similar in the way the discourse unit is structured. The selection of one or the other type of formulation rather seems to be governed by the teacher's orientation to the kind of argumentative context in which he presents his judgment about a pupil. The negative type of assessment (*absolutely not a HAVO pupil*) is clearly used as a polemic device. It is used in an environment in which the teacher takes a position that is in disagreement with the position taken by the previous speaker in the discussion round. For example, the math teacher's contribution in Example (6) follows a contribution of the manual skills teacher (MS), who is in favor of promoting Claudia to HAVO-2. She concludes her contribution by pleading for promotion ('give it a try'; line 1):

(7)

1 →	MS:	*maar ik e*:*h* (0.2) *volmondig eh probee*:*r maar hoor.*
		but I u:h wholeheartedly uh just give it a try, really.
2		0.8
3		*jah.*
		yes.
4		1.2
5	MA:	°*m*:. (0.3) *mh*:.° (1.1) *e*:*h* (2.2)

6 *ik vinn't zElf helemaal: geen HAVO twee*
I myself think this is no HAVO-2 at all.

In the same discussion round about Claudia, there is another instance of a teacher casting her position by denial of membership-category incumbency. The drawing teacher (DR) is also disagreeing with the position taken by the teacher that came before her (line 1):

(8)
1 → MU: *ik denk dat 'r meer in 't meisje zit.* (0.8)
I think there is more in this girl.
2 *en dat dat,* (0.4) *wellicht* (.) *ontluikt?*
and that this, perhaps will bud?
3 2.4
4 MA: *Anita?*
5 1.8
6 → DR: *jah ik zie hier dus* (0.3)
well I definitely see PRT.
7 *helemaal geen: geen HAVOleerling in.*
not ((a)) not a HAVO pupil here.
8 → *jij zei net rustig, afwachtend.*
you just said ((she is)) quiet, expectant.
9 *bij mij is 't al:tijd zo alsof*
with me it is always as though
10 *ze de opdracht niet begrijpt* (. . .)
she doesn't understand the assignment

The negative assessment is used in an environment in which it expresses an opinion that strongly disagrees with the position taken by the preceding speaker. The pupil is typified by stating that she lacks exactly all those features that would legitimize assignment to the category of HAVO pupils.

Note that both teachers shape their disagreeing assessment as an *extreme case formulation* (cf. Pomerantz 1986): 'absolutely not a HAVO pupil' (Extract [6]) and 'definitely not a HAVO pupil' (Extract [8]). The pupil's inaptitude for promotion to HAVO is asserted in the strongest possible way. The combination of a negative, denying statement together with an extreme case formulation makes the assessment a very polemic device. This is perhaps also necessary because it is not only the local sequential context these speakers are disagreeing with. The discussion round about Claudia ends in a vote in which all other members of the team are in favor of promotion to HAVO-2, and only the math teacher and the drawing teacher vote against it. Moreover, both teachers put

forward their position at a point at which it has become clear already in what direction the discussion will go. After five of his colleagues have already signaled they are in favor of promotion to HAVO-2, the math teacher is the first to bring forward a dissenting opinion. The drawing teacher is the last speaker in this round and at this point a no-vote cannot change anything anymore. Perhaps it is this taking position against all odds that explains for the rhetorical formatting of the contribution of the no-voters.

The considerations that govern the selection of the other type of assessment are less clear. Contrary to the polemic quality of the negative assessments, there is no clear pattern of disagreement with the preceding contribution(s). The *good-MAVO-pupil* assessments rather have a *no-dispute-needed* quality. Another indication for this no-dispute property is that the positive assessment is more often done in contributions that do not contain any further accounting. Compare, for example, two other contributions to the discussion round about Fabienne in which a teacher formulates her position in terms of a *good-MAVO-pupil* assessment. The French teacher (FR) assesses Fabienne immediately after the Dutch teacher's contribution (Extracts [1] and [5]):

(9)

1	MA:	*Mari<u>a</u>nne?*
		0.4
2	FR:	*daar sluit ik me <u>he</u>lemaal bij a(f).*
		I absolutely agree with this.
3		1.0
4 →		*goeie <u>ma</u>vo leerling,* (0.3) *<u>ha</u>vo vin ↑ik* (2.9) *<u>nee</u>h!*
		good MAVO pupil, HAVO I think no!
5		1.0
6	MA:	*Ester?* ((Ester is the English teacher))

The geography teacher assesses Fabienne two contributions later:

(10)

1	MA:	*Bert?*
2		1.5
3 →	GE:	'*n*:: *<u>goe</u>je <u>ma</u>voleerling.*
		a:: good MAVO pupil.
4		0.7
5		°>*<u>he</u>le goeie mavoleerling.*<°°
		very good MAVO pupil.
6		2.2
7	MA:	*<u>so</u>ms vind ik dat ze wat <u>O</u>ver heeft* (. . .)
		sometimes I think she that she can do more

In both cases, the speaker does not account for his position any further. Additional accounting work usually indicates that the action that is accounted for is oriented to as a sequentially problematic, dispreferred action (see Heritage 1988). The two instances of the negative assessment type we discussed earlier, for example, were both accounted for elaborately (see Extracts [6] and [8]). Taking position against promotion to HAVO-2 is dealt with as a problematic action that does require further accounting work. The speakers that use the positive assessment, on the other hand, treat their position as a contextually unproblematic one. It does not require any further legitimation or clarification. The positive assessment appears to be used as a nonpolemic device for formulating a position in favor of taking the hard decision to promote the pupil in question to 'only' MAVO-2. The only exception is the long treatise with which the Dutch teacher opens the discussion round about Fabienne. The length and complexity of his contribution might be due to the fact that the Dutch teacher is the first one to contribute to the discussion round. First contributions to a discussion round about a disputable case are mostly shaped as a relatively elaborate treatise. The first speaker in a new run in the decision-making system is a kind of opinion maker. He supplies the first assessment of the discussion round, setting up the framework within which the ensuing discussion will move.

Jayyusi (1984: 82) discusses several methods by which the members of a culture locate the use of membership-categorization devices in talk. Some devices are provided for

> by the semantic-taxonomic sense of the category-concepts on the one hand and the talk's relevances on the other. (. . .) Such devices or collections may be observably used as *resources* by members in the organization of their category-selection procedures, e.g. 'family', 'occupation', 'religion', 'nationality', etc. (1984: 82)

Another type of device is provided for in the talk where it

> is hearable as part of the upshot of the talk or the task to be accomplished (. . .) and hearable thus through the local and topical production of 'fit' between certain features of the category-concepts. (1984: 82)[7]

The *MAVO/HAVO pupil* device the teachers use in the situated activity system in the report-card meeting only partially fits this inventory. On one hand, the *MAVO/HAVO pupil* collection is conventionally standardized because of the current sociopolitical institutionalization of a hierarchically ordered system of different types of high schools in the Netherlands.[8] On the other hand, the collection is reduced to an ordered pair of categories that fit the task at hand in discussion zone HAVO-2 in the decision-making system. The rules of application are specific to the

situated activity system, and the actions that may be done with them are as well.

5. Blocking category transition

The membership categories *MAVO pupil* and *HAVO pupil* thus are both used by the teachers in the discussion rounds about a pupil in discussion zone HAVO-2. Within the situated activity system for making a decision about a pupil in this discussion zone, these two categories form a membership-categorization device. The categories in the collection {*MAVO pupil, HAVO pupil*} are ordered relative to each other, and this ordering determines how they are used and what can be done with them. Although the decision-making procedure is designed as a series of choices between mutually exclusive alternatives (see Section 3), the membership categories *MAVO pupil* and *HAVO pupil* are not mutually exclusive when they are used as measurement categories for making an assessment of a pupil in discussion zone HAVO-2. They stand in an asymmetrical relationship: a pupil who is assessed to be able to do HAVO is assumed to be also able to finish MAVO without any problems, because MAVO is defined as the lower, less difficult type of high school. A pupil who is assessed to be able to do MAVO is not necessarily considered to be able to do HAVO, even if s/he is qualified as *a good MAVO pupil*. As assessment categories in the membership-categorization device that is adapted for the situated decision-making system, *MAVO pupil* and *HAVO pupil* are ordered relative to each other as cumulative categories. The orientation to this asymmetrical, cumulative ordering also explains some of the practices the teachers use in and around the turn-constructional units in which this type of categorial assessment is applied. This is the subject of this section.

Within the interpretative framework of the decision-making system in the report-card meeting, a characterization of a pupil as a *good MAVO pupil* triggers a principle of binary reasoning according to which a teacher can be heard stating the opinion that this pupil should not be promoted to HAVO-2. In spite of this, the speaker may still articulate the statement's categorical character with a scope-constraining addition. Compare Extract (11), which is from discussion round about Danny (discussion zone *HAVO-2*):

(11)
1 MA: *Bert?* ((Bert is the geography teacher))
2 1.5

3	GE:	*e:h ('n aanta-) ook wat eh steekjes lateh valleh*
		u:h (a numbe-) made some minor uh mistakes too
4		*zie ik.* (0.6) *hè ik e:h* (0.6)
		I see. you know. u:h
5		*a'k 'm zo zie zitteh< denk ik nou:,*
		if I look at him, I think, well,
6 →		*goeje (hè?) heel goede* (.) *mAvo leerling.*
		good (you know) very good MAVO pupil.
7		1.5
8 →		*maar: e::h niet meer dan dat.*
		but u::h no more than that.

The assessment of Danny as *a good MAVO pupil* is followed by a scope-constraining explication: 'but u::h no more than that' (line 8). Saying that Danny is *a good MAVO pupil* should not be understood as implying that he is eligible for promotion to HAVO. Such a generous reading is explicitly blocked in a *post-assessment interpretation limiter*. The French teacher does something similar in her contribution to the discussion about Fabienne (compare Extract [9]). After having assessed her as *a good MAVO pupil*, she too does scope-constraining work by explicitly rejecting the HAVO alternative: 'HAVO I think ... no!' Apparently, both teachers feel some pressure to block 'upward' interpretations in the direction of the higher alternative. The pressure may have its origins in the compound character of assessments of the type *a good MAVO pupil*. Assessing a pupil as *a good MAVO pupil* is a measurement in terms of two scales. First, when a pupil is typified as a *MAVO pupil*, a selection is made from an ordered collection of school-type categories:

Scale 1. *Types of secondary school*
⟨LBO, MAVO, HAVO, VWO⟩[9]

When a pupil is assessed as a *good* MAVO pupil, on the other hand, a choice is made from a gradual scale that has measurement points such as 'weak', 'ordinary', and 'good':

Scale 2. *Types of MAVO pupils*
⟨..., weak, ..., ordinary, ..., good, ...⟩

Obviously, when a pupil is said to be at the upper end of Scale 2, this may have consequences for the stability of the school-type categorization. Assessing a pupil as a *good MAVO pupil* allows for a kind of upward category transitivity in Scale 1. A *good MAVO pupil* may become a *HAVO pupil*, as is also formalized in the measurement system in which pupil scores provide the basis for allocation to discussion zone *HAVO-2* (see

Table 1). The scope-constraining additions in Extracts (9) and (11) deal with this type of category transitivity. They block the potential of upward category mobility by precluding an interpretation that the qualification as *a good MAVO pupil* is heard as a plea for promotion to HAVO.[10]

Category transitivity may be constrained in other ways as well. Compare the self-corrections of the geography teacher in Extracts (10) and (11). In Extract (11), he corrects his assessment of Danny from '*good*' to '*very good*'. In Extract (10), he does a similar type of upgrade of his assessment of Fabienne. In both cases, the teacher does the assessment upgrade in an interactionally observable way. This visibility of the self-correction is a methodic way of showing a movement from an unmarked positive formulation to a special type of extreme case formulation, a kind of *upper limit formulation*. By exposing the self-correction, the speaker signals that this is the ultimate concession. This is how far the speaker can go in being positive about the student.

So both the scope-constraining additions in Extracts (9) and (11) and the upgrading self-corrections in Extracts (10) and (11) do border-drawing work. The upgrading self-correction sets the upper limit of the assessment. The scope-constraining addition forestalls transgression of the upper category border into the next higher category.

6. Summary and discussion

In a treatise on the relation between social organization and the use of language forms, Hanks (1996: 213–222) discusses the notion of *communities of practice* (cf. Wenger 1998) as a promising alternative to approaches in correlational sociolinguistics that

> relegate verbal practices to the secondary position of reflecting social facts defined apart from them, and [this view] reifies social structure as something objective and fixed. (Hanks 1996: 221)

Hanks (1996: 221) considers the concept *community of practice* to be more promising because it

> shifts the ground of definition from either language or social structure per se to the engagement of actors in some project. [...] The promise of this approach is that it provides a framework in which to define modes of participation and ways of speaking relative to the processes through which they are constituted.

Conceptualizing the work of the teaching team in terms of a community of practice indeed offers an appropriate framework for examining the talk in the staff meeting. The analysis shows, however, that we also need

intermediary concepts that specify what kinds of projects the actors are engaged in. The interaction in the report-card meeting is organized as a situated decision-making system that is part of the repertoire of this community of practice. It is specifically designed for this type of occasion and is installed and resorted to in the course of the meeting itself. Sorting pupils in the final report-card meeting of the year is a task for which the community of practice has developed a specialized activity system with its own mode of interactional organization, norms, and procedures. The activity system makes the work both interactionally feasible and institutionally accountable. It includes specialized devices for describing and evaluating pupils.

The teachers in the report-card meeting do not use the membership categories *MAVO pupil* and *HAVO pupil* for descriptively referring to a person as a *MAVO* or *HAVO pupil*, but rather for assessing a pupil in consideration of the decision that has to be taken. Within the situated activity system, the categories *MAVO pupil* and *HAVO pupil* locate school careers about which the teaching team has to decide. A pupil becomes a *MAVO pupil* if s/he is not promoted to *HAVO*. When a teacher uses a category from the *HAVO/MAVO pupil* collection, a pupil is not just measured in terms of a possible future identity, but also typified by it. The measurement system used to decide about a pupil's future career is reified as a personal trait of the pupil himself.

Assessments of the type *not a HAVO pupil* judge a pupil by denying his capability to become an incumbent of the higher school-type category. Assessments of the type *a good MAVO pupil* evaluate a pupil by asserting a quality ranking within the lower school-type category. Both types of assessments are used for establishing the same position in the discussion about a disputable case. This is achieved along lines of inference making that exploit the binary mode of decision making in which the discussion about disputable cases is set up in the situated activity system. Each type occurs in specifiable contexts. The positive type of assessment casts the position brought forward with it as self-evident, unproblematic, and not-disagreeing; the negative assessment occurs in disagreement contexts and has a polemic quality.

The asymmetrical, cumulative ordering of the categories in the collection calls for accompanying practices for formatting pupil assessments (extreme case formulations, post-assessment interpretation limiters, upper-limit articulating self-corrections). The application of such devices is perhaps skewed under the influence of the teachers' orientation to the delicacies of political correctness. This explains why the deployment of school-type based membership categories is restricted to discussion rounds about pupils in the 'higher' discussion zone. In discussions about pupils

who are not promoted or who are sent to a 'lower' type of high school, the teachers avoid overt typifying categorizations of pupils. In the latter type of context, position-taking and the ways it is accounted for are not formatted in terms of school-type–based membership categories.

Insofar as the ascription of a pupil to a school-type category cannot be done in a wholly formalized and routinized fashion with the help of the allocation algorithm, the teachers use practices for category allocation that are discursively organized. In an insightful analysis of the way a team of geochemists learns to use a color category in a laboratory situation, Goodwin (1997: 133) cites a passage from Wittgenstein that also applies to the ways the teaching team deals with membership categories in the report-card meeting:

> If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreements not only in definitions but also [...] in judgments (Wittgenstein 1958: §242).

Goodwin (1997: 133) continues by pointing out that

> [...] for Wittgenstein, the meaning of a name is not its bearer (e.g. a range of shades named by a color term), but rather mastery of the practices to use that category competently within a relevant language game.

The practices the teachers use to allocate pupils to school-type membership categories accountably are socially organized and shaped within the situated activity system for the report-card meeting. The team has to discursively reach agreement on the decision to reject allocation to the membership category *HAVO pupil*. Membership-category transition and membership-category allocation is often organized in this way in professional organizations. The work of category assignment is distributed over a team of professionals who collaborate within a more or less standardized situated activity system that is specifically designed for the task. The members of the team have to manage to agree upon how to value the observations they make about the person regarding whom a sorting decision has to be taken and they use specialized descriptive practices for accomplishing this.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

Based upon the notation developed by Gail Jefferson (2004)

[	In the case of simultaneous talk, the onset of the overlapping turn is located by a *left square bracket* in the overlapped turn.

0.6	The length of silences between and within turns is measured in tenths of seconds; '(.)' indicates a short silence of less than 0.2 seconds.
. , ?	Punctuation marks: a *period* indicates a falling pitch contour, a *comma* a slightly rising pitch contour, and a *question mark* a strongly rising one.
↓↑	Vertical arrows represent local pitch movements in the syllable that follows it. A *downward arrow* signals a falling tone movement, an *upward arrow* a rising one.
w<u>or</u>d	*Underlining* signals a salient accent.
°soft°	The *degree sign* signals that an utterance part is produced more softly than the surrounding talk.
LOUD	*Capitals* indicate relative loudness.
>faster<	This utterance part is produced with higher pace than the talk surrounding it.
wor:d	A *colon* renders a noticeable sound stretch.
sto-	The *hyphen* is used as a cut-off marker.
(guess)	The transcriber is uncertain about the utterance part in parentheses.
((words))	Text in double parentheses provides background information.

Notes

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1. The multidisciplinary research project 'Interaction in the multi-cultural/multi-lingual classroom as a means of inclusion and exclusion' was financed within the framework of the program The Dutch Multicultural and Pluriform Society of the Dutch Research Council (NWO; program no. 261-98-524).
2. The judgment that teachers make of a pupil is of course not the only basis for deciding about their future. Other kinds of expertise are also involved (cf. Mehan 1991, 1996). In our meeting data, the teachers also resort to expert assessments of pupils, especially the results of the national pupil-performance test bureau (see Note 7).
3. The transcription conventions (see Appendix) are largely identical with the CA transcription system that was developed by Gail Jefferson. Inti Soeterik made the first rough transcription protocols; Tina Rundervoort did the second transcription round.
4. MAVO is an acronym for 'mid-level general secondary education', HAVO for 'higher general secondary education'. MAVO takes 4 years, HAVO 5 years. The highest type of secondary school in the Netherlands is VWO ('preparatory academic education'; 6 years). Only VWO gives direct access to the university. Pupils graduated in HAVO can continue at an advanced level in VWO, or they can go to the university with a degree from a college.

5. The 'total score' of a pupil is the sum of his or her end score for separate subjects. In the Dutch system for grading school results, a 10-point scale is used where 10 is the highest grade and 1 the lowest. A grade of 6 points is still considered to be minimally sufficient (comparable to 'C' in the American system). A score of 5 or lower is an insufficient grade.
6. 'CITO score': CITO is the Dutch pupil-performance test bureau. At the end of their time in elementary school, about 80% of all pupils in the Netherlands undergo the 'CITO test'. The score on this test is often decisive for admitting a pupil to a higher type of secondary education. Although the CITO score of the pupils that are discussed in the report-card meeting is from a test that was taken at least one school year earlier when they were admitted to the school, it is still part of a pupil's record. In the report-card meeting, the CITO score is listed in the spreadsheet that was handed over to the teachers at the beginning of the meeting.
7. See Schegloff (1972: 107): '(...) we should note those classes whose co-members are grouped together for a single attribute, and hence may be a class for a single (or limited range of) topic.'
8. Category labels such as *MAVO-leerling* ('MAVO pupil') and *HAVO-leerling* ('HAVO pupil') have the form of a compound noun. Their first part is a school-type name and their second part is the word for pupil (*leerling*). In Dutch, compound nouns are a very productive device for building categories. Labels such as *HAVO pupil* and *MAVO pupil* categorize a person in terms of institutional membership. The name of the institution of which the person in question is a member is used as the first part of the category name (*MAVO* and *HAVO*). The institution type (school) provides the set of categories in terms of which member types are specified in the second component of the category label: {*pupil*, *teacher*, ...}.
9. LBO is the acronym for a high-school type for practical vocational training; VWO is the highest type of secondary school (see Note 5).
10. There is some similarity with Gricean quantitative implicatures, especially scalar implicature (see Grice 1975; Gazdar 1979). However, the bridging-class measurement system is a situated system developed within the framework of working practices. Although the inferential system can be described in a Gricean style, a contextualized, non-truth conditional treatment of the rules of inference as supplied within the situated activity system seems to be more appropriate.

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