Studying at Home: With Whom and in Which Way? Homework Practices and Conflicts in the Family

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In recent years, international comparative studies have provided strong evidence for the powerful influence of students' socioeconomic background on their educational success. Because the slope of the socioeconomic gradient is particularly steep in Germany, public sensitivity and scientific interest in socialization processes within the family has dramatically increased in this country.

In this context, findings on family involvement in education suggest that children may benefit from their parent's engagement in schooling (Cooper et al. 2006). However, research analyzing the effectiveness of programs to improve parental involvement or dealing with the impact of the school-related activities of parents on different outcomes generally reveal quite inconsistent results (Mattingly et al. 2002; Patall et al. 2008). This somewhat disappointing conclusion may be due to the conceptual and methodological problems inherent in most of the studies at hand (Wild and Lorenz 2010).

Present theoretical contributions underline that family involvement is a complex, multifaceted construct that subsumes a wide array of parental activities (which are reflected in, for example, the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships; http://www.pta.org/1216.htm) such as participating in school decision making (e.g., participating in school committees), contributing to school activities (e.g., excursions, festivities), communicating with the school (e.g., volunteering at school, exchanging information with teachers), as well as forms of involvement in children's educational experiences at home (e.g., supervision and

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monitoring, daily conversations about school). Consequently, *multidimensional conceptualizations of parent involvement* (e.g., Cooper et al. 2000; Grolnick and Slowiaczek 1994) have been developed that provide theoretically derived dimensions of school engagement.

Unfortunately, much of the empirical research on parent involvement does not apply these conceptualizations. Instead, most studies have either investigated the "overall" impact of family involvement on children's learning outcomes (often by using solitary items from surveys to assess parent involvement) or focused on isolated parent involvement behaviors. Moreover, much of the literature concerning the effects of homework has devoted attention almost exclusively to school performance (in terms of grades) as an outcome measure (Cooper et al. 2006). Therefore, very little is known about the impact of parental school engagement on learning outcomes beyond children's achievement.

Recent reviews (e.g., Sacher 2008) suggest that *school-based activities* (including home–school conferencing as well as parental contributions to school activities and school decision making) may be important for children's psychosocial development (e.g., the degree of conduct problems), but that they do not (strongly) predict their academic development. In contrast, *home-based family involvement* (or school-based home instruction) influences students' learning outcomes as measured in terms of grades, learning motivation, attention, task persistence, self-concept, as well as domain-specific and self-regulatory skills.

Therefore, our work focuses on school-based home instruction and further differentiates between *quantitative and qualitative aspects*. With respect to the first, we are interested in variations in (a) the frequency of school-based home instruction, (b) the amount of time that parents invest, and (c) the degree to which families rely on human resources within the family (e.g., siblings, grandparents) and outside the family (e.g., teachers, commercial tutoring).

With respect to the *quality* of children's educational experiences at home (i.e., home-based family involvement), we developed a four-dimensional conceptualization of parental help (see Lorenz and Wild 2007). This theoretical framework is strongly inspired by self-determination theory (SDT; see Deci and Ryan 2000), which, in essence, proposes that humans are intrinsically motivated to pursue activities that are interesting, optimally challenging, and spontaneously satisfying. From this perspective, an individual's development will not be distorted as long as the social context (i.e., socializing agents) allows the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: the needs for autonomy, competence, and social relatedness. To the degree that these basic needs are satisfied, individuals may internalize extrinsically motivated behaviors (e.g., uninteresting but socially prescribed activities) into personally important behaviors.

By applying this approach to the conceptualization of home-based family involvement, we differentiate between four dimensions of parental help:

- The first dimension, labeled *autonomy-supportive help*, can be characterized by the imperative "parental assistance as much as necessary, but as little as possible." This rule of thumb implies that parents should adjust the amount and kind of their assistance to the capabilities of their individual child in order to help him or her to increasingly assume personal responsibility for the learning process.

- The second dimension, *structure*, refers to the extent to which parents indirectly support their children's self-regulated learning by creating learning situations that do not overburden the child's capacities but allow him or her to behave in an autonomous way. Orientation is given by setting clear expectations, standards, and values and by implementing rituals to handle, for example, homework situations.
- The third dimension, *responsiveness*, reflects the degree to which parents express their interest in the child's school experiences and help him or her to cope with failures.

Up to this point, we assume that students will be more motivated to learn, to improve their learning strategies, and to acquire a deeper understanding the more their parents implement these principles, that is, the more they are likely to provide an autonomy-supportive, responsive, and structured learning climate at home.

- In contrast, the fourth dimension, *control*, is considered to be a dysfunctional type of parental help because of its negative effects on need satisfaction. Parental control includes the exertion of excessive pressure on children to complete assignments as well as parental use of extrinsic performance-contingent rewards. Taking the continuing controversy concerning reward effects on intrinsic motivation into account (e.g., Deci et al. 1999), we argue that achievement-oriented pressure must not undermine intrinsic motivation but is insofar suboptimal because parental reliance on extrinsic rewards may increase students' performance (-avoidance) orientation and not foster the internalization of achievement-related values, standards, and rules.

In light of these conceptual clarifications, we now turn to the presentation of selected results that provide an insight into homework practice in German families. At first, we focus on quantitative variations in school-based home instruction: Age-related differences will be reported, and results for different domains, school types, and social status groups will be contrasted. Our second part focuses on how the amount and type of parental help are linked to a range of learning outcomes. Furthermore, we shall present a parent training designed to reduce homework conflicts and to improve the quality of parental help. The final part addresses theoretical considerations and preliminary findings on the determinants of parental school engagement.

Homework Practice in Germany: Differences Depending on Age, Subject Domain, and Social Background

Present findings on the determinants and consequences of parent involvement stem almost exclusively from empirical studies conducted in foreign countries and may not be applicable to the situation in Germany for several reasons:

- The German educational system differs in essential aspects from most other systems (e.g., explicit and early tracking; most students attend a half-day school and have to do homework at home).

- In contrast to other countries, teacher training in Germany does not entail any profound preparation for creating productive partnerships with families.
- Correspondingly, the level of parent–teacher cooperation in Germany is still low and intermittent; the relationship between parents and teachers is tense (Sacher 2008).
- In Germany, the proportion of full-time female employees with school-age children is lower than in most other western industrialized nations. International comparative studies have suggested that this phenomenon may be attributed to societal norms and insufficient support services for working mothers (e.g., Badinter 2010).

In view of these obstacles, we started our research program by investigating whether the prevailing practice of family involvement in Germany follows the same pattern identified in previous studies. Since age-related differences in parental involvement have been studied most, we first examined whether the frequency of parental instruction declines as children grow older and whether decreases depend on the school track students attend. To obtain a deeper insight into the reasons for the assumed diminishing engagement, we further inspected students' learning behaviors, the provision of support by other persons (besides parents), as well as differences in the quality of parental support.

To obtain some information on age-related changes in the amount of parental involvement, we conducted a cross-sectional study of homework practices in the subject of German studies with approximately 1,000 students attending 4th, 6th, and 10th grades[1] (see, for greater detail, Gerber and Wild 2009). Our analyses revealed that in elementary school, *parents* play a primary and almost exclusive role in homework assistance (see Fig. 1). Accordingly, only a minority of young children cannot ask for their parents' help, and this is essentially true for secondary students, too. As expected, *peers* (siblings, classmates) become an increasingly important source of homework assistance in secondary school. But even in the 10th grade, when peers represent the most preferred partners, parents are still reported to be the second most important source of homework assistance.

Interestingly, less than 20% of students rely on the help of relatives (e.g., grandparents), family acquaintances, or professionals (teacher, educational staff in schools) or obtain support from paid persons (private tutoring, extra tutoring in commercial facilities). Nevertheless, the percentage of 6th and 10th graders receiving extra tutorial support is significantly higher than the proportion of 4th graders.

[1] At the end of elementary school (the 4th grade), German students are assigned to different school tracks in order to continue their secondary education. Most students attending the highest track run through the *Sekundarstufe I* (5th to 10th grade) as well as the *Sekundarstufe II* (11th to 12th or 13th grade). Having completed their final secondary-school examinations (*Abitur*), they may apply for courses leading to a bachelor and/or master degree. In contrast, the majority of students attending the middle track (*Realschule*) or the lowest track (*Hauptschule*) start their vocational trainings at the end of the 9th or 10th grade.

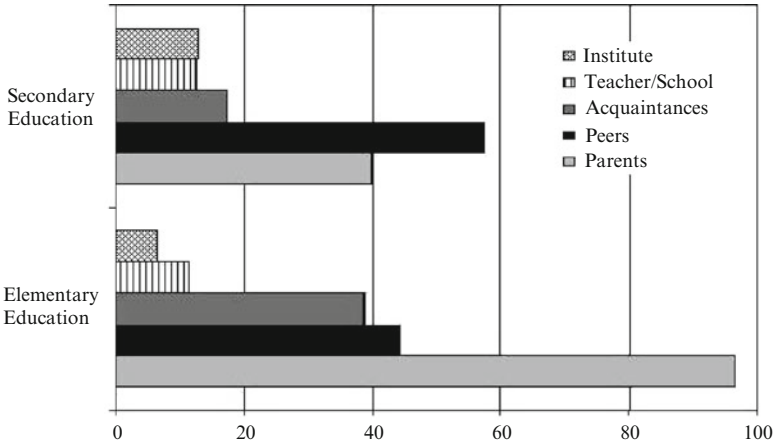

Fig. 1 Age-related differences in sources of homework assistance (Adapted from Gerber and Wild 2009)

Further studies are needed to explore whether this phenomenon may be attributed to increasing performance requirements in secondary education.

Although these results indicate a somewhat sustained significance of school-based home instruction, this notion may be questioned because of methodological restrictions (cross-sectional database) and conceptual constraints (e.g., investigating homework practice in a single domain). Our longitudinal studies addressing homework practice in chemistry and mathematics at different grades, however, dispel these objections (Exeler and Wild 2003; Wild et al. 2006). Taken together, these findings provide strong evidence for the assumption that the majority of German students—even in secondary school—rely on their parent's assistance when learning at home. However, the frequency of parental assistance varies across grade levels rather than across different subjects (minor vs. major subject; mathematics vs. science vs. German studies), and this observation raises the question why parents' involvement decreases as students grow older.

In light of recent findings on the determinants of student's self-regulated learning (e.g., Dettmers et al. 2009; Trautwein et al. 2006), this phenomenon might simply reflect changes in the density of homework assignments and students' homework practices. Our analyses support this idea insofar as they suggest age-related differences in learning behavior. Although the time students spend on completing their homework does not vary across grade levels and school types, we found that the percentage of "seasonal learners" (Mischo 2006)—that is, students who do not learn continuously—increases with higher grade levels. In addition, analyses revealed that older students are more likely to restrict their time investment in out-of-school learning to short-term preparations for examinations.

Interestingly, these changes in students' behavioral patterns are associated with changes in the occasions for and kinds of parental help: the more learning processes

at home are oriented toward performance (vs. learning) goals, the more they are negatively evaluated by students. In fact, older students are more likely to experience their parent's help as controlling, to evaluate homework situations as less enjoyable and parental help as less desirable, and to show a reduced tendency to ask for parental help.

Below, we shall take up this overall finding again; in advance, however, we want to inspect differential developmental trajectories in homework behavior in more detail. Our previous considerations abstracted from differences in subpopulations, although results from international comparative studies indicate that the socioeconomically related inequality in academic competencies is higher in Germany than in most other OECD countries. Therefore, our further analyses aimed to explore in more depth the influences of social background on homework assistance. We focus on secondary school students because previous results suggest that children from higher socioeconomic groups are particularly favored in secondary education—not least because the type of secondary school attended is strongly related to social class (Baumert and Schümer 2001).

Comparative analyses between students visiting the lowest track (*Hauptschule*) and the highest track of the German school system (*Gymnasium*) revealed that utilization of peer support is largely independent from school type. In contrast, the engagement of parents differs significantly: The 6th graders attending the highest track obtain more parental support than their counterparts on the lowest track. In the 10th grade, this difference was less pronounced than in the 6th grade because of the generally reduced amount of parental support.

At first sight, our findings correspond to the complaints of many teachers over an increasing drop in parental engagement in general and in the involvement of socially disadvantaged parents in particular. Yet both phenomena have to be interpreted with caution for two reasons: First, it has to be taken into account that older students should have higher self-regulation competencies and therefore may need less support or profit more from another kind of instruction. Second, the benefit of out-of-school assistance may depend on task difficulty and the expertise of family members. From this perspective, an increasing parental withdrawal from school concerns may be appropriate in most families because older students become competent self-regulated learners to the degree they are challenged to take responsibility for themselves. At the same time, maintaining the amount of school-based home instruction also makes sense as long as students are confronted with increasing demands—this situation is presumably more likely when students attend the highest track and/or suffer from learning disabilities. In both cases, however, adaptations in the *kind* of assistance may be more essential than changes in the *pure amount* of support.

These considerations lead to the next issue: the impact of differences in the *quality* of parental instruction on students' learning outcomes.

With regard to the four-dimensional conceptualization of school-based home instruction described above, we were interested in (a) the predictability of each dimension and (b) changes in autonomy-supportive instruction, structure, control, and emotional involvement over time. Both questions were addressed in a longitudinal study (see Wild and Lorenz 2010; Wild et al. 2006) in which approximately

200 families were visited annually over a period of 6 years. We started with the 3rd graders in order to investigate changes in students' learning outcomes and relevant characteristics of students' learning environment (both in school and at home) during the transition from elementary to middle school. In view of the domain specificity of most learning outcomes, we focused on the quality of parental instruction in the domain of mathematics.

Overall, the findings from our longitudinal study (see, for an overview, Wild and Lorenz 2010) replicate and expand previous work (see, for reviews, Grolnick et al. 2007; Patall et al. 2008; Wild and Lorenz 2010). With respect to the incremental impact of each single dimension of parental instruction, we found that students may profit from their parents' emotional involvement and autonomy support in terms of a higher sense of (domain-specific) self-efficacy, a higher frequency of positive learning emotions (i.e., joy, pride), and more effective strategies to cope with negative learning emotions in the domain of mathematics. Moreover, they also may profit in terms of an incline in self-regulated learning motivation and deep approach-learning strategies that lead to a better conceptual understanding (Deci and Ryan 2000). Interestingly, our results only partly support the notion of negative effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation (see, for further information on cognitive evaluation theory, Deci et al. 1999). Nevertheless, they do indicate that parental control is associated with higher levels of extrinsic motivation. Moreover, it also enhances performance-avoidance goal orientations and increases the likelihood of dysfunctional learning behaviors (such as procrastination or cheating).

Given the current state of research on parental involvement in schooling, it is interesting to know whether changes in the quality of parent involvement may explain the well-known decrease in students' shift from learning to motivation (see, for a review on German findings, Schwinger and Wild 2006). Our results on longitudinal changes in parental instruction support central assumptions of the stage–environment–fit approach (e.g., Eccles et al. 1993; Gutman and Eccles 2007). This approach indicates an increasing mismatch between students' needs and the kind of support provided by parents.

Most notable is the finding that students are more likely to perceive their parents' instruction as controlling as they become older. This result parallels our cross-sectional findings in the domain of German studies (see below) and qualifies them insofar that changes in students' perceptions obviously correspond with changes in their parents' kind of support. In fact, comparisons of parental self-reports over time reveal an increasing tendency to control their children's learning behavior and outcomes. Also in line with the stage–environment–fit approach, we found that autonomy-supportive and responsive kinds of parental instruction decrease over time. However, statistically significant changes were restricted to self-reports of parents.

In sum, our findings indicate—in line with previous results and theoretical assumptions—that the amount and quality of parental involvement change over time. Given the idiosyncrasy of the educational system in Germany, however, it is reasonable to attribute this phenomenon to underlying developmental processes on the individual and/or family level that influence parental involvement over and beyond institutional conditions (e.g., differences in educational systems). At the

same time, our analyses extend the present research in two ways: First, our results suggest that developmental processes taking place on the individual level (in terms of students' growing self-regulation capabilities and their increasing sense for autonomy) interact with changes on the microlevel (i.e., an increasing tendency of parents to react in a controlling manner). Conjointly, they produce changes in the amount and type of parental involvement. Second, significant relations between different kinds of homework practice on the one hand, and a variety of learning outcomes on the other hand, support the assumption that differences in school-based home instruction may contribute at least to some extent to inequalities in students' competencies. Consequently, interventions aiming to improve the quality of parental support may serve as an instrument to improve both our understanding of the mechanisms underlying social inequalities as well as our knowledge concerning the attainable benefit of programs aiming to increase equality.

Improving Parental Involvement in Schooling: New Insights into the Alterability and Antecedents of High-Quality, Home-Based Instruction

A host of studies have shown that educational goals and aspirations of parents are highly stable over time. To test the implicit premise that parental instruction can nevertheless be altered, we conducted an intervention study addressing families of parents with children (5th and 6th graders) suffering from learning difficulties (i.e., problems in the domain of mathematics). The goal of our parent training was to reduce homework conflicts, to enhance parents' self-efficacy, to foster autonomy-supportive and responsive behaviors of parents, and to decrease parents' controlling behaviors (see Rammert 2010; Wild and Gerber 2009; Wittler 2009). The effectiveness of this parent training was examined in a quasi-experimental study following a pre–post, follow-up design and including two experimental groups (face-to-face and autodidactic treatments) and one control group (waiting group).

Preliminary results of this intervention study are encouraging insofar that homework conflicts were reduced significantly in the experimental group. Furthermore, trained parents felt more capable of supporting their children effectively, and they were more likely to help their children in an autonomy-supportive manner. At the same time, parental control decreased over the course of the intervention.

Our findings indicate that homework practice can be altered by parent trainings and raise the question of the target audience of trainings. A second line of our research, therefore, aims at the identification of "risk groups" of families by analyzing potential determinants of adaptive and maladaptive forms of parental instruction in more depth. Theoretically, we picked up the pioneering work of Wendy Grolnick, who has been particularly interested in the preconditions of parental controlling behaviors (see Grolnick and Apostoleris 2002; Gurland and Grolnick 2005), and the framework of Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995). Because the model of parental involvement developed by Hoover-Dempsey and colleagues

(Green et al. 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 20s05) focuses on preconditions that motivate parents to become involved in a wide range of parental involvement activities, we adopted this model to study determinants of the *quality* of school-based home instruction, in particular.

The working model developed by Yotyodying (2012) proposes five dimensions (first-order factors) of antecedents of the quality of school-based home instruction with two second-order factors per dimension:

- The first dimension, *parental conceptions of responsibility*, distinguishes between active and passive conceptions of responsibility. Actively responsible parents see themselves as being responsible for the learning process and academic performance of their child, whereas passively responsible parents become involved in the child's schooling only when the school expects them to do so.
- The second dimension, *parental role conceptions*, refers to the way in which parents frame learning situations at home. According to Renshaw and Gardner (1990), parents may interpret (informal) learning arrangements primarily as a challenge to promote children's self-regulated learning (process orientation) or to improve academic performance (product orientation).
- The third dimension refers to *parental teaching efficacy*. The model distinguishes between the general confidence of parents in their own teaching skills and efficacy beliefs with regard to a specific domain.
- The fourth dimension is concerned with *invitations to involvement in school-based home instruction*. These invitations can be expressed by the child or by school staff.
- The last dimension, *life context*, refers primarily to the amount of time, and energy parents may devote to their child's learning experiences and school concerns. In addition, it deals with previous school experiences of parents and resulting attitudes concerning the importance of (formal) education.

The construct and factorial validity of this ten-component model of antecedents of the quality of school-based home instruction was tested in a cross-cultural comparison study conducted by Yotyodying (2011). Multiple group confirmatory factor analyses based on a cross-sectional data set of approximately 800 parents from Germany and Thailand yielded an acceptable fit. Furthermore, the model yielded cross-cultural construct validity (model form invariance), and most of the components of the model also yielded cross-cultural factorial validity (factor loadings invariance). Low to moderate intercorrelations between factors indicate good discriminant validity. In addition, the findings of the structural equation model validation revealed that these factors predicted differences in quality of parental instruction in a meaningful way.

Figure 2 depicts the path coefficients between the ten factors and two latent variables reflecting two types of perceived parental instruction: (a) authoritative instruction (comprising autonomy support and responsiveness) and (b) authoritarian instruction (comprising structure and control). The first latent variable was predicted significantly by seven factors. In line with theoretical considerations, it was found that parents are more likely to adopt an authoritative style of instruction the more

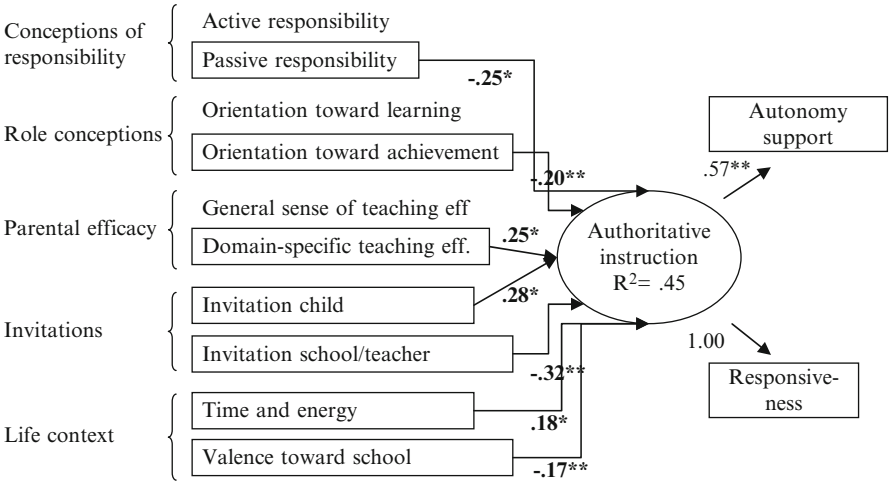

Fig. 2 Antecedents of authoritative parental instruction. Model fit indices: χ^2 (7, N=288)=4.60, χ^2/df=.66, p=.75, GFI=1.00, AGFI=.97, RMR=.01, RMSEA=.00. *p=.05. **p=.01 (Adapted from Yotyodying 2012)

they report high general self-efficacy, feel invited by the child, and have both enough time and energy to take care of their child's learning progress and educational attainment. In contrast, parents are less likely to adopt authoritative kinds of instruction when they hold a more passive view of their responsibility, tend to frame learning situations in terms of chances to strive for performance goals, and link their own school days with less positive experiences. Contrary to our expectations, parents are also more likely to create learning situations at home in an authoritative manner the more they perceive that teachers welcome their active participation.

As expected, our findings concerning the adoption of an authoritarian instructional style reveal a somewhat complementary correlational pattern (see Fig. 3). Parents are more likely to control and guide their child's learning behaviors, the more they are oriented toward performance goals and are confident about their own teaching skills, in general. In contrast, parents are less likely to perform in an authoritarian way the more they feel competent in the specific domain, feel invited by the child, have time and energy, and evaluate their own school-related experiences in a positive way. Interestingly, the degree to which parents feel invited by teachers or schools does not contribute to explaining interindividual differences in authoritarian instruction by parents.

Overall, our results not only support the validity of the multidimensional model of antecedents of the quality of parental involvement in schooling but also indicate that even differences in the instructional practice of parents in varying nations can be explained—to some extent—by ten antecedent factors. Insofar, the present findings extend previous work on explanations of the pure amount of parental involvement by providing empirical evidence for the incremental predictive power of *parental*

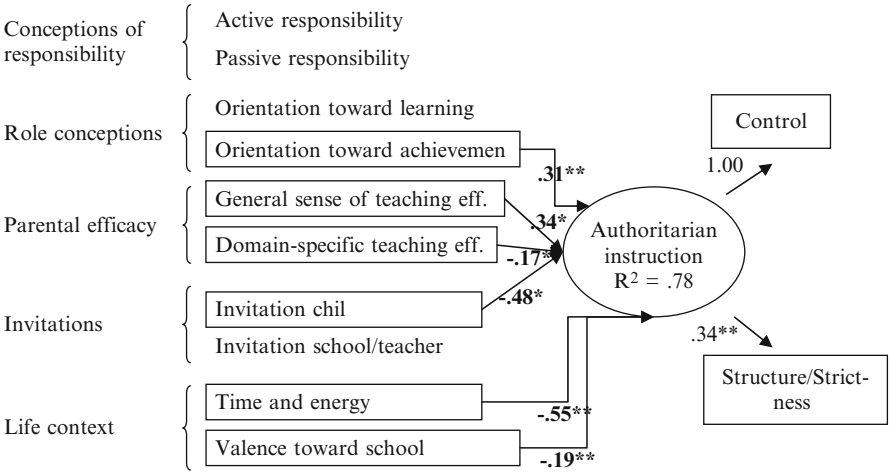

Fig. 3 Antecedents of authoritarian parental instruction. Model fit indices:χ^2 (3, N=288)=.28, χ^2/df=.09, p=.96, GFI=1.00, AGFI=1.00, RMR=.00, RMSEA=.00.*p=.05. **p=.01 (Adapted from Yotyodying 2012)

attitudes (e.g., parental conceptions of responsibility, parental role conceptions, and self-efficacy) and *interpersonal conditions (*i.e., the extent to which parents talk with children and teachers in order to exchange information on school-related issues) across different nations and educational systems.

Of course, some findings warrant further investigations. First of all, our model seems to put greater emphasis on "*risk factors*" (i.e., on circumstances that foster an authoritarian style of instruction or impair an authoritative approach) than on "*protective factors.*" Insofar, further investigation should be directed to identify those parental attitudes, motives, or perceptions of environmental affordances that lead to an increase in parents' readiness to coach their child's learning progress in an autonomy-supportive and responsive manner. Furthermore, scientific attention should be addressed to explore in more depth the cost and benefits of school/teacher invitations. Our results indicate that teacher's invitations may be maladaptive as long as they take place in a culture of parent–teacher consultations that is characterized by a predominance of achievement-related issues in which conflicting interests and viewpoints are in the forefront.

Apart from this consideration, the significance of the present results for educational policy and practice is obvious: Although parent involvement has become an important goal and target for educational reform in many countries, existing programs tend to be pragmatic in their orientation, and (therefore) empirical evidence for their effectiveness is weak (Mattingly et al. 2002). Against this background, the theoretical considerations and results presented here may be transformed into at least three recommendations for optimizing programs to increase parental involvement: (a) Parental trainings should focus on school-based home learning

(vs. participation in school activities and decisions) because students may profit most. (b) These trainings should aim to improve the quality (rather than the amount) of involvement. (c) The sustainability of training effects may be increased by addressing not only parental behavior but also the underlying attitudes and motives.

School and Family: Unrelated or Overlapping Spheres?

In her "model of overlapping spheres," Epstein (1986; Epstein et al. 2002) posits that students succeed at higher levels when the internal and external models of influence intersect and work together to promote student learning and development. The external model refers to the contexts in which students live (e.g., home, school, and community), whereas the internal model describes the intersections of interpersonal relations and interactions that can occur on an institutional level (e.g., the school inviting families to a parent night) or an individual level (e.g., parent–teacher conference). With regard to homework assistance, this model posits bidirectional influences between the family and the school environment: The degree and quality of parental involvement should depend not only on *characteristics of the educational system* (e.g., the degree to which the assignment of students to different school tracks depends on socioeconomic status and parental aspirations; legal regulations concerning the right of parents to participate in school-related decisions) but also on the *practice of cooperation between parents and teachers*. The latter can be conceptualized as a function of individual role conceptions, attitudes, skills, and perceived affordances on both sides, which are, in turn, dependent on structural conditions such as the amount of time students have to or may spend in school.

In this context, it is worth noting that the politically motivated expansion of all-day schools (with optional courses [*offene Ganztagsschulen*] or obligatory courses [*gebundene Ganztagsschulen*]) has recently been pursued in Germany with considerable state resources (Quellenberg 2007). This situation provides a historically unique chance to examine in more detail the interplay between institutional provisions, on the one hand, and the utilization of these institutional resources and its effects, on the other.

Fortunately, data collected in the cross-sectional study of Gerber and Wild (2009) already described above allow us to investigate whether homework practice differs depending on "school structure" (i.e., half-day schools vs. all-day schools). Analyses of a total of 541 reports by 4th-, 6th-, and 10th-grade students showed that the majority of German students (71.0% of the sample) still attend a half-day school but do not utilize the homework assistance their school provides. A second group (21.3% of all students) attends an all-day school and also does not take homework assistance in school into consideration. Consequently, only a few students rely on institutional homework supervision, and this minority is pretty evenly split into two subgroups: students attending an all-day school (4.3%) and a half-day school (3%).

Do these four groups differ in their homework practice? Our analyses revealed that neither the time students spent on completing their homework, nor the likelihood of homework conflicts, nor the quality of parental instruction as perceived by the child, nor the degree to which mothers, fathers, siblings, and professionals are involved differs depending on group membership. We also found that neither socioeconomic status nor maternal employment status had strong correlations with either group affiliation or parental involvement in schooling.

Overall, our results suggest, in line with findings of a large panel study (see Holtappels et al. 2007), that the social or ethnic background of students does not explain whether they attend an all-day school or not and utilize homework assistance at school or not. Most notably, the quality of parental instruction does not seem to vary depending on institutional homework supervision or social class.

If our findings can be replicated in further studies, several interesting questions arise. One of the most important is: which societal conditions may explain why school-offered homework assistance is hardly used in Germany? Cross-cultural studies are needed to test the assumption that albeit global social changes in conceptions of childhood and parenting may not only reinforce parents' feelings of responsibility for their children's educational outcomes but also their children's psychosocial adjustment.

Obviously, a large and continuously increasing percentage of German parents are convinced that children have to be prepared for school as early as possible, and most parents (across social classes) feel obliged to make tremendous investments in their children's academic career over and beyond formal education (Merkle and Wippermann 2008). This trend may facilitate the formation of school–family partnerships but may, contrariwise, complicate endeavors to create two-way communication channels between school and home to the extent that parents doubt the effectiveness of the school system and/or perceive the school primarily as an authority for selecting and allocating options. Moreover, school programs fostering parental involvement may be functional in terms of empowering but, at the same time, may enhance existing defenses of teachers and overburden parents who do not have the required skills and resources. Therefore, further research is needed to identify requirements of parents, teachers, schools, and communities that are necessary to ensure that national standards for family–school partnerships (like those of the National Parent Teacher Association 2008) do not degenerate into a "tyranny of participation."

With respect to school-based home instruction, our findings indicate that proximal variables such as parental role conceptions or children's invitations may explain differences in the quality of homework practice. In this context, children's invitations refer to the extent children ask for help or offer parents the chance to participate in their childhood experiences. Therefore, to improve the effectiveness of parent involvement programs, it is meaningful to focus not only on issues of parental behavior but also on parental attitudes, motives, and efficacy beliefs.

Nowadays, the majority of parents are willing to support their children's learning progress and are actively engaged in learning processes at home. Nevertheless, there are differences in the quality—and, in turn, in the effectiveness—of parental

instruction. Consequently, trainings aiming to improve the quality of school-based home instruction should inform parents about which strategies are counterproductive and what kinds of support may enhance students' learning motivation, self-regulation competencies, and performance. In this context, our results validate and extend previous work (Helmke et al. 2004; Niggli et al. 2007; Trautwein et al. 2001) on the differential impact of distinct types of parental help on students' learning outcomes.

In the United States, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (*NCLB*) *of 2001* was a starting point for a variety of programs to improve the quality of schools by increasing parental involvement and facilitating the formation of effective school–family partnerships. The common mission of these programs is to close the achievement gap through accountability, flexibility, and choice so that "no child" is left behind. Our findings substantiate the importance of this mission and provide some information on how to implement it successfully.

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