The role of parents' motivation in students' autonomous motivation for doing homework

Idit Katz *, Avi Kaplan, Tamara Buzukashvily

Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

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ABSTRACT

The present research employed Self-Determination Theory as a theoretical framework for investigating the role of parents in the quality of the motivation that students adopt towards homework. One hundred and thirty five dyads of 4th grade Jewish-Israeli children and one of their parents responded to surveys. The findings indicated that parents' behavior that supported the children's psychological needs was positively related to the children's autonomous motivation for doing homework. Parents' need-supportive behavior was associated with parents' own autonomous motivation for involvement in helping with homework – i.e., parents' identification with the importance of such involvement – with parents' competence beliefs, and with parents' positive attitudes towards the task of homework. The findings highlight the role of type of parents' involvement with their children's homework in the children's motivation toward homework, and of parents' own type of motivation for this task in the quality of their involvement.

1. Introduction

Students have been required to supplement their learning in school by doing homework ever since the mid-nineteen century (Gill & Schlossman, 2004; Gordon, 1980). Research also indicates that policy-makers, administrators, teachers, and parents perceive homework as important for learning and achievement (Gill & Schlossman, 2004; Van Voorhis, 2004; Warton, 2001; Wiesenthal, Cooper, Greenblatt, & Marcus, 1997; Xu & Yuan, 2003). Yet, interestingly, as a topic of research, homework has been rather neglected (Murray et al., 2006; Trautwein & Köller, 2003). Moreover, commonly, rather than contributing to learning and achievement, homework constitutes a stressful issue among many parents and students (Coutts, 2004; Levin et al., 1997; Margolis, McCabe, & Alber, 2004). Hence, research is required for identifying processes and practices that could facilitate more adaptive engagement in homework.

Unfortunately, research indicates that many students engage in homework assignments not because of adaptive motivation such as interest or excitement about the task, but rather because of less adaptive motivations such as a sense of duty, desire to please, and avoidance of punishment (Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, Whetsel, & Green, 2004). Research suggests that these types of motivations are less desirable than motivation that is based on interest, enjoyment, and the purpose to learn and understand (Ames, 1992; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Homework is a unique academic task in that it is administered at school but is conducted at home. Yet, relatively few studies have investigated the role of the home environment in students' motivation for homework. In the present study, we evaluated the role of parents in the type of motivation that students adopt for homework. More specifically, we tested a theoretical model that suggests that parents' characteristics are related to their behavior when interacting with their children around homework, which in turn, is related to their children's motivation for doing homework. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) – a humanistic perspective on motivation and adaptive development – provides the theoretical framework for this study.

1.1. The self-determination perspective on students' motivation to learn

In the past three decades, research findings have emphasized the importance of students' motivation for their experience and performance in school (Alonso-Tapia & Pardo, 2006; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Soenens, & Matos, 2005). Results from studies employing experimental, correlational and qualitative methods have converged on the finding that when students engage in academic tasks out of intrinsic reasons such as interest, enjoyment, and the purpose to learn and understand, they engage more meaningfully, regulate their learning, achieve higher grades, retain the material, and manifest higher well-being than when they engage in academic tasks out of more extrinsic reasons such as a desire to please others, to demonstrate ability, to avoid feeling incapable, or to avoid punishment (Ames, 1992; Bouffard, Marcoux,

* Corresponding author at: Dept. of Education, Ben-Gurion University, P.O. B. 653, Beer-Sheva, 84105, Israel. Tel.: +972 8 6461887; fax: 972 8 6472897.
E-mail address: katzid@bgu.ac.il (I. Katz).

Vezeau, & Bordeleau, 2003; Coutts, 2004; Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991; Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Midgley, 2002; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004, 2005.

One of the primary theoretical frameworks of motivation that has been applied to educational settings is self-determination theory (SDT). SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) is a macro theory of human motivation concerned with the development and functioning of personality within social contexts. The theory specifies a continuum of motivational orientations for activities, ranging from extrinsic/controlled regulation (engagement out of coercion or for achieving a reward), to intrinsic/autonomous motivation (engagement out of pleasure, interest, and enjoyment). Research results are quite consistent in suggesting that the more autonomous the motivation – or the locus of regulation of action – the higher the quality of engagement and the well-being of the student (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

SDT emerged from a humanistic perspective on human motivation. According to this theory, there are three basic human psychological needs – for autonomy, relatedness, and competence – that when satisfied enhance autonomous motivation and lead to autonomous internalization of behaviors of initial extrinsic origin (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The satisfaction of the three psychological needs depends on the support for these needs that is provided by the environment. Thus, unlike early need-based theories of motivation, which viewed motivation as an individual-difference characteristic that is mostly determined by personality or developmental processes (e.g., McClelland, 1961), SDT views motivation as dependent on context, and has been emphasizing the role of the environment in motivational change (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Hence, SDT assigns a primary role to significant others (e.g., teachers and parents) in providing support for children's psychological needs that contributes to the internalization of their motivation for activities (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Katz, Kaplan, & Guetta, 2010; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997).

1.2. Parents' involvement in their children's education

Generally, parental involvement in their children's education is considered to be desirable. However, findings concerning the relations of parent involvement with students' outcomes are not ubiquitous. Whereas many studies found parental involvement to be positively related to adaptive student outcomes (e.g., Hill & Craft, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Walker et al., 2004), other studies did not find such relations (e.g., Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Levin et al., 1997), and some studies even found indication of possible harm of parental involvement to students' achievement and well being (e.g., Larson & Gillman, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wolfsom, Mumme, & Guskin, 1995).

One possible reason for the inconsistent findings in research on parental involvement is the different definitions of the involvement and the outcome variables. Some researchers have defined involvement as parents' behavior at home (e.g., helping with homework), while other researchers have looked at parents' behavior at school (e.g., attending school events) or at parent–teacher interaction (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Similarly, some researchers have focused on the relations of parental involvement with students' achievement (e.g. Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Pomerantz, Grolnick, & Price, 2005), while others have focused on students' well-being (e.g. Grolnick et al., 1991; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), drop-out rates, and participation in advanced courses (Ma, 1999; Trusty, 1999).

About a decade ago, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) responded to the scattered nature of the literature by proposing a theoretical model of the parental involvement process. The model, which was later revised by Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005), emphasizes parents' characteristics including parents' motivational beliefs of role construction and self-competence, parents' perceived invitation for involvement by others,

and parents' perceived life context such as availability of time and energy, skills, and knowledge. These characteristics were described as affecting various parents' involvement types, which in turn affects students' outcomes such as skills, knowledge, and self-competence. This theoretical model is said to present a "framework for examining the relation between parents' subjective involvement experiences and their actual involvement in children's schooling" (Walker et al., 2005, p. 100). The model provided a significant advancement in conceptualizing parents' involvement in children's schooling. Yet, the authors realized that the model was an initial framework that required further conceptual and empirical elaboration (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

In the present study, we suggest that an important aspect that could enhance the explanatory power of the parent involvement model is the conceptualization of parental involvement along the autonomous-controlled distinction emphasized by SDT. More specifically, we suggest that when parental involvement is perceived by students to be autonomy-supportive it will be related to adaptive outcomes such as high quality motivation to schoolwork. We investigate this hypothesis in the context of homework.

1.3. Parents' involvement in homework

Similar to research on general parental involvement, research on parental involvement in homework finds inconsistent relations (Forsberg, 2007; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Sharp et al., 2001). Some studies found positive relations of parents' involvement in homework with students' outcomes such as academic ability (e.g., Goldenberg, 1989; Hewison, 1988), while other studies did not (e.g., Pezdek, Berry, & Renno, 2002).

The findings regarding the relations of parental involvement and student outcomes, generally and in homework, may suggest that rather than the *level* of parental involvement, it is the quality or the type of involvement that would influence students' outcomes (Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Patall et al., 2008; Pomerantz et al., 2007). Theory and research on parenting suggest that different types of parental involvement produce different types of parent–child interactions and hence different emotional outcomes. For example, Gonzalez, Holbein, and Quilter (2002) found that different parenting styles were associated with different motivational emphases to children and with different achievement goal orientations. Authoritative parenting style, which combines high expectations and demands with high warmth and support, was associated with mastery goals (the orientation to learn and understand). In contrast, authoritarian and permissive parenting styles, which are characterized by high demands with no warmth and by low demands and high warmth, respectively, were associated with performance goals (the orientation to demonstrate competence or avoid demonstrating incompetence).

Similarly, parents' involvement that included support for the child's autonomy through valuing and encouraging independent problem-solving, choice, and participation in decision-making was positively related to students' effort (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan Holbein, 2005), standardized test scores, higher teacher assigned grades, and more homework completed (Cooper et al., 2000), whereas involvement that is controlling was negatively related to these outcomes. Pomerantz et al. (2007) suggested that "how" parents get involved with their children's homework determines to a large extent the success of this involvement. These authors emphasized four dimensions that characterize the quality of parents' involvement in homework: autonomy support vs. control, process vs. person focus, positive vs. negative affect, and positive vs. negative beliefs about children's potential. They suggested that parents' involvement may be particularly beneficial for children when it is