



# The interplay of students' and parents' responsibility judgements in the school context and their associations with student motivation and achievement



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## ABSTRACT

Due to the important motivational implications of an individual's sense of responsibility, this paper studies the interplay of 271 secondary school students' and 101 of their parents' responsibility ascriptions for student learning and their relations to student motivation and achievement. Three dimensions of responsibility were identified; responsibility for the learning process, student achievement and establishing a supportive social network. Students' sense of personal responsibility was related to their ascriptions of responsibility to parents and teachers and their own subject-specific motivation and school achievement. All of these were found related to parents' responsibility judgements and expectancies. These findings underscore the importance of the school context for fostering students', teachers' and parents' sense of responsibility for ensuring students' academic success.

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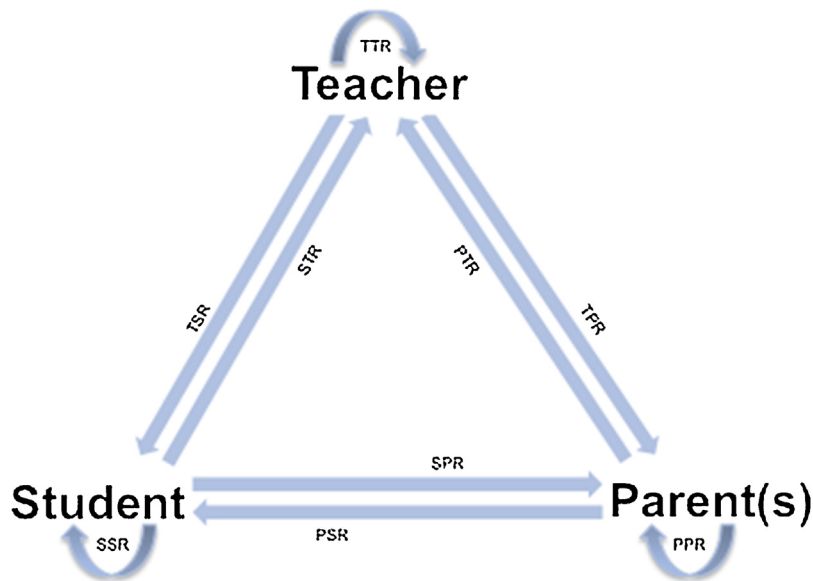
What students, teachers and parents feel are held and hold others responsible for in the school context has been the focus of multiple reforms and discussions in recent years that focus on how to improve schools, the education they provide to students as well as student achievement (Maulbetsch, 2010; Sternberg, 2003). This research sets out to explore this interplay by assuming that student, parent and teacher responsibility are highly interrelated.

Prior research in a multitude of disciplines (e.g., Auhagen, 1999; Bayertz, 1995; Hart, 1968) has found responsibility ascriptions to result not only from the individual her/himself but also the social group they are involved in and which ascribed responsibility to them (Bacon, 1991, 1993; Kammerl, 2008; Lauer mann & Karabenick, 2011). This differentiation between feeling and being held responsible, i.e. a person's individual sense and ascribed responsibility, is central as individuals with a strong sense of responsibility tend to engage in specific behaviours because they experience an internal sense of obligation and commitment to do so (e.g., Lauer mann, 2014; Lauer mann & Karabenick, 2011). Nevertheless, existing research on responsibility in school has largely neglected exploring the complex social dimension of responsibility, i.e., the interplay of the different agents' perspectives on their own and each others' responsibility, as well as its influence on further factors related to working and learning in schools.

This research aims to address this issue by assuming the existence of a certain interplay of what students, teachers and parents feel and hold each other responsible for in the school context (see Fig. 1). What any of these three agents feels responsible for is assumed to influence their judgements of responsibility of other people, so that parents, who might for

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**Fig. 1.** Nine perspectives of responsibility ascriptions in the school context and abbreviations (e.g., SPR → students' perspective on parent responsibility).

example hold their child's teacher responsible for negative outcomes would not ascribe responsibility to their child. However, responsibility that is attributed to a person does not automatically imply a personal sense of this responsibility in this person since there is often no adjustment of the different perspectives (Helker & Wosnitza, 2014a). Fig. 1 provides a systematic overview of the existing perspectives.

According to the above, the aim of this research is to study the differences between students' and their parents' perspectives on their own, each other's and teachers' responsibility in the school context and their relations with other factors of working and learning at school. For this study, we chose a school that by means of a specific learning setting emphasises student autonomy and control for their own learning by following an alternative approach to teacher-based instruction. In this school, the five main subjects are learned entirely autonomously and self-directedly with the help of learning materials developed and provided by the school.

## 2. Prior research on responsibility in the school context

Teaching and learning at schools has changed considerably over the last decades with new responsibilities assigned to teachers and schools in general as a result of increased school autonomy but also economic, social and cultural changes all over Europe (Eurydice, 2008). Some even find the ascription of responsibility to be a part of a general strategy of delegating tasks between schools and the home environment of students (Oelkers & Lange, 2012) which has led to a raised awareness and discussion of parent involvement and shared responsibilities between schools and students' homes. To date, however, most tasks and liabilities in school remain implicit and vague (Feiks, 1992; Fischman et al., 2006; Pätzold, 2008) with most of the existing research focusing on teachers (Helker & Wosnitza, 2014b). In view of the unclear norms of their profession, Fischman, DiBara and Gardner (2006), for example, found teachers to broaden their responsibilities as a consequence of their perception of students' academic, social, emotional and developmental demands. Teachers' sense of responsibility for students' academic success has been found to be strongly influenced by contextual factors of their school, including school size (Lee & Loeb, 2000), ethnic and socio-economic background (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004) and cultural background (Barrett, 2005; Karakaya, 2004). This was particularly so for teachers' sense of responsibility for student positive or negative learning outcomes that was explored in a number of studies (e.g., Guskey, 1981, 1982; Halvorsen, Lee, & Andrade, 2009; Matteucci, 2008; Matteucci & Gosling, 2004). Thrupp, Mansell, Hawksworth and Harold (2003) found in their interviews that most teachers stated that they thought they could be held responsible for student outcomes to a limited extent due to the impact of the more or less supportive family background.

Parent involvement can have a direct positive influence on student achievement in school, due to parents' communication about school issues with their child, expectations they hold and how they support their child's learning (see Castro et al., 2015; Jeynes, 2007; Menheere & Hooge, 2010 for reviews). Parents' school involvement can also have indirect effects on students' school achievement, as parents' evaluation of their child's abilities, hopes, expectations and values were found to influence the child's expectancies, perceived competence, values and thus school outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Gniewosz, 2010; Grolnick, 2015; Hong & Ho, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). Furthermore, Cheung and Pomerantz (2012) found this effect to be supported by students' parent-oriented motivation in school (i.e., the desire to avoid punishment and to obtain rewards from parents), which predicted their level of

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