



Who is responsible for educational outcomes? Responsibility ascriptions for educational outcomes in a sample of Italian teachers, parents, and students

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ABSTRACT

Teachers', parents' and students' beliefs about their reciprocal roles and responsibilities at school are crucial if responsibility for educational process and outcomes is to be effectively shared.

Results of previous research, however, indicate that their perspectives on responsibility do not completely overlap. By investigating 235 students', 35 teachers' and 175 parents' assignment of responsibility to themselves or to others at an Italian junior-high in parallel with a high school, this study shows that students', parents' and teachers' ascription of responsibility significantly differs, especially concerning parent responsibility in school and students' own perceived responsibility. The study suggests the need for and importance of further investigating the interplay of responsibility assignment in the school context so as to help schools create a positive and effective school-family relationship, establishing a mutually accepted frame of responsibility.

1. Introduction

One shared goal of Western Countries is to improve efficiency in schooling by developing policies aimed at building more effective education systems responding better to higher social and economic expectations. In this framework, a special focus has often been placed on the theme of responsibility in the school context, leading to broad discussions and international comparisons on competencies and responsibilities of stakeholders in that context (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013, 2016).

Recent reviews of research contributions on responsibility in the school environment stress the complexity of the responsibility concept (Helker & Wosnitza, 2014a, 2016; Lauermaun & Karabenick, 2011, 2013, 2014) and suggest that, while the notion of responsibility itself has been studied from various angles, until recently, relatively few studies specifically focused on the *personal* sense of responsibility for educational outcomes among the three main stakeholders of the school context, namely students, parents and teachers. In the world of school, it is extremely important we study perceptions of responsibility especially because when parents, teachers and students view one another as partners in education and recognize their shared interests and responsibilities, a caring community forms around students and they begin to work together to create better programmes and student opportunities (Epstein, 1995).

In accordance with the above, the aim of this research is to study

parents', teachers', and students' ascription of their respective responsibilities for educational outcomes. The study is grounded on an interactive idea of the genesis of a person's sense of responsibility in that we assume that students', teachers' and parents' sense of responsibility derives from their interactions and sense of each other's responsibility, as suggested by Helker and Wosnitza's (2014a, 2016) theoretical model which was empirically investigated in the German context. In this study, we will transfer this research to another context, for the first-time analysing responsibility ascription in a sample of Italian junior-high school and high school teachers, students and parents.

1.1. Teacher responsibility

Teachers' responsibility ideally derives from their total, direct and personal responsibility for their students (Schurr, 1980), which makes every teacher action a morally motivated action (Ladd, 1982; Oser, 1994). While in that respect, the teacher's role does not markedly differ from that of the parents, the teacher's responsibility is, at least theoretically, limited in time and restricted to specific spheres of action that teachers share with their students (e.g., Feiks, 1992; Helker & Wosnitza, 2014a). In these interactions, teachers' own sense of responsibility is shaped by their perception of the school context, their evaluation of learning contents, and their view of desirable student outcomes: knowledge and skills for when the latter finish school. Of course, what teachers feel and what they are held responsible for might differ. The

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reason for this is that, unlike other professions, the teaching profession lacks a clear description of the norms of conduct, which are known to, and applied by, all members of this professional group (Brezinka, 1995; Fischman, DiBara, & Gardner, 2006). Some work has focused on *caring* as the primary responsibility that results from relations with other people and affects the individual as well as others. Caring is taken to be closely related to the responsibility of all educators, teachers and parents alike, namely, to take responsibility/care for adolescents until they are able to take responsibility/care for themselves and their own lives (Noddings, 2005). These considerations also suggest that educators' responsibility changes with the age of the student and also from one school grade to the next, as teaching is more than simply planning and conducting lessons and school outcomes are much more than about student grades.

Empirical research on teacher responsibility has, however, only studied teachers' responsibility for their students' school outcomes (e.g., Guskey, 1981, 1982; Matteucci, Carugati, Selleri, Mazzoni, & Tomasetto, 2008) and shown that student learning is higher in schools with higher levels of collective teacher responsibility (Lee & Loeb, 2000).

In general, teachers feel more responsible for their students' success than failure (Matteucci & Gosling, 2004; Potvin & Papillon, 1992). One further study has found that teachers who were willing to hold themselves responsible for their students' results, deemed themselves also more able to influence the causes or antecedents of student failure, compared to less responsible teachers (Matteucci, 2008).

In an attempt to capture the concept of teacher responsibility, Lauermaun and Karabenick (2011) studied the differing conceptualizations of teacher responsibility and empirically explored teachers' sense of their own responsibility, which led to the identification of four dimensions of that sense of teacher responsibility, namely *responsibility for teaching*, *student motivation*, *student achievement* and *teachers' relationships with students*. In further research, Matteucci, Guglielmi, and Lauermaun (2017) found that highly responsible teachers reported higher levels of work engagement and job satisfaction than less responsible teachers, and that teacher responsibility is related to mastery-oriented instructional practices.

That these aspects also have an effect on students was shown by prior research (e.g., Helker & Wosnitza, 2014a, 2014b; Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque, & Legault, 2002; Younger & Warrington, 1999) which found teacher responsibility to be particularly related to the students' own sense of responsibility.

1.2. Student responsibility

Student responsibility is a difficult concept to grasp as it entails two different conceptualizations. On the one hand, student responsibility is seen as a general trait that students learn during education, i.e. that students grow up and are enabled to take responsibility for their own lives as well as for the society and nature in which they live (i.e., Fischer, 1987). The second conceptualization of student responsibility is not as broad but mainly focuses on students' school-related actions, tying up with the teachers' role as discussed above. Teachers are assumed to be able to raise students' sense of responsibility by being responsible role models themselves (Ahrling, 2006), but also by endowing students with personal responsibility by creating a learning environment that enables students to feel competent and autonomous (Chamberlin & Chambers, 1994).

Another study found that students who used higher-order learning strategies rated their abilities and personal responsibility higher (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005) while a study by Bryan and McLaughlin (2005) suggests that this relation can be assumed to be bidirectional, i.e., control and learning strategies lead to a stronger sense of responsibility and highly responsible students will develop better learning strategies. Recently, in his empirical studies on students' sense of primary and secondary control over their learning (i.e., either

influencing or adapting to the learning environment), Fishman (2014) demonstrated that students' sense of responsibility for academic outcomes plays a partially mediating role in the relationship between their perceptions of control and their reported use of self-regulated behaviour and concluded: "students who believed they could influence their environment to achieve intended academic outcomes were more likely to feel a sense of internal obligation to produce such outcomes" (Fishman, 2014, p. 696).

Bacon (1991), in his work on student responsibility, believes the differentiation between being held and *being* responsible to be parallel to that between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. While a student who is being held responsible is compelled to engage in the learning process, a student who feels responsible "provides the primary emphasis for learning, and (...) engages in the learning process to gain additional knowledge" (Bacon, 1991, p. 395).

Finally, research on causal attributions has proved that students are able to use self-presentation strategies in order to obtain social approval, as students are aware that causal explanations of success and failure determine teachers' inferences of perceived controllability and responsibility, and convey emotional reactions (e.g. feelings of anger or sympathy) which have been shown to have a positive or negative impact on social responses and achievement evaluation (e.g. Matteucci, 2014, 2017).

As already mentioned above, teachers in their work with their students form their expectations not only on their perception of student motivation or deficits, but also on family support (Thrupp, Mansell, Hawksworth, & Harold, 2003).

1.3. Parent responsibility

In recent years, a large number of studies have identified numerous positive effects of parental involvement when it comes to their child's learning and achievement in school (see Castro et al., 2015 for a review). However, only a few studies have specifically focused on parents' responsibility in the school context. Epstein (2011) differentiates between three types of responsibility, namely separate, shared and sequential responsibilities by families and schools, thus suggesting that, whichever of these three types prevails in each specific home-school relation, teachers and parents mutually share the responsibility for the education of the child, although they do not both contribute equally to this shared goal. In a study across eight European countries, results revealed that parents emphasised the "asymmetric relationships" between school and home in that they were held responsible for getting information from teachers rather than being informed by teachers, and thus had to "cope with institutional demands of individual responsibility" (Ule, Živoder, & du Bois-Reymond, 2015, p. 343). These findings were supported by further empirical research (Ramirez, 1999) which concluded that while teachers (99% of 70 teachers to grades 9–12 involved in the study) emphasised the importance of parent involvement for a good school, only about half of the teachers surveyed said they felt personally responsible for involving parents. However, international recommendations suggest that teachers should be exhorted to welcome all parents as partners in education to support children/students to do well in school and in life (OECD, 2017). And yet, a recent study showed that when the focus was on home-school contact, parents were assigned more responsibility for contacting their child's teachers than teachers were for reaching out to parents (Helker, 2016).

1.4. Helker and Wosnitza's model of interactive spheres of responsibility

The social context in which student learning takes place has been found to be heavily influential. Research with Korean students found that teachers' and co-students' emotional support predicted students' having stronger mastery goals, weaker performance-avoidance goals, lower test anxiety and higher academic achievement (Song, Bong, Lee, & Kim, 2015). Social support for student learning thus contributes to

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