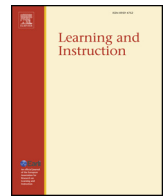




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Maternal homework assistance and children's task-persistent behavior in elementary school



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ABSTRACT

The present study used a sample of 365 children to investigate the longitudinal associations between maternal homework assistance (i.e., help, monitoring, and autonomy granting) and children's task-persistent behavior in learning situations from grade 2 to grade 4 of elementary school. Also, the extent to which task-persistent behavior plays a role in the links between parental homework assistance and children's academic performance was examined. The results showed that the more autonomy granting mothers reported, the more task-persistent behavior children exhibited; and more task-persistent behavior children exhibited, the more autonomy their mothers granted. In contrast, the more mothers helped their children, the less task-persistent behavior was reported, and the less task-persistent behavior children exhibited, the more mothers tried to help and monitor their children later on. Additionally, some evidence was found supporting the role of task-persistent behavior in the relation between maternal homework assistance and academic performance.

1. Introduction

Parents are involved in their children's schooling in several ways. One of the most typical forms of such involvement is assistance with homework (Jeynes, 2005; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008; Pezdek, Berry, & Renno, 2002; Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001), which is assumed to have a positive effect on different schooling outcomes, not only on academic achievement (for a review, see Patall et al., 2008) but also motivation-related behavior (e.g., Leone & Richards, 1989; Shumow, 1998). Interestingly, previous literature has mainly focused on direct links between parental homework practices and children's skill development and found rather contradictory results concerning the benefits of parental homework assistance: some studies have found a positive association between parental homework assistance and children academic performance (Dumont et al., 2012; Patall et al., 2008), whereas in some studies a negative effect has been found (Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Silinskas, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Nurmi, 2013). It has, further, been acknowledged that different types of homework practices are differently associated with children's schooling outcomes (e.g., Silinskas, Kiuru, Aunola, Lerkkanen, & Nurmi, 2015; see

also; Patall et al., 2008), which partly explains the contradictory findings.

However, one important limitation in previous research is that it has often neglected the role of motivation-related behavior, such as task persistence, in relation to homework assistance and school achievement. This is surprising, because it has been suggested that motivation-related factors may help to explain the previous contradictory findings regarding the relations between homework assistance and children's skill development (see Patall et al., 2008). Only a few studies have examined the associations between the different types of parental assistance and children's motivation-related factors longitudinally (for exceptions, see Dumont et al., 2012; Dumont, Trautwein, Nagy, & Nagengast, 2014), and also taken the role of skills into account simultaneously. The present study aims to fill these gaps in previous literature by examining the longitudinal relations between different types of maternal homework assistance (help, monitoring and autonomy granting) and the behavioral aspect of children's motivation, that is, task persistence, from Grade 2 to Grade 4 of elementary school, after controlling for children's skill level. Additionally, the study aims to examine whether there are indirect effects between maternal

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homework assistance and children's skills via task-persistent behavior.

1.1. Homework assistance

Previous literature often defines parental homework involvement either in terms of the amount or frequency of such involvement or in terms of the quality of involvement (Moroni, Dumont, Trautwein, Niggli, & Baeriswyl, 2015; Silinskas & Kikas, 2017; Xu, Fan, Du, & He, 2017). Also, it typically distinguishes between different types of homework involvement (e.g., Dumont et al., 2014, 2012; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Grolnick, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Ng, Kenney-Benson, & Pomerantz, 2004; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). In the present study, the focus is on the amount of three different types of homework assistance.

Recent literature on parental homework assistance has often relied on the ideas of Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) as a theoretical framework to distinguish the different types of assistance (for a review, see Pomerantz et al., 2007; see also Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001; Silinskas et al., 2013; 2015). According to SDT, feelings of competence and autonomy (as well as relatedness) are essential for all motivated behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and different kinds of parental practices satisfy children's needs for competence and autonomy in different ways. First, autonomy support is defined as allowing children's independence and own initiative in solving various problems and challenges (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In homework assistance situations, this means that if autonomy is granted, a parent trusts that the child will be able to work independently and take responsibility for his or her own homework (Silinskas et al., 2015, see also; Pomerantz et al., 2007). This, then, will lead to an increase in children's feelings of autonomy and competence.

In contrast, more controlling parental behavior involves regulating children's actions through different kinds of methods, such as commands or directives. In previous literature on homework assistance, this more controlling type of parental assistance has typically been further divided into help and monitoring (Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Silinskas et al., 2013, 2015). Help can be conceptualized as active teaching and guiding a child in his or her homework, whereas monitoring refers to checking whether children's homework is complete and correct. Pomerantz and Eaton (2001) have suggested help and monitoring to present forms of intrusive support in situations where a parent may help and monitor child's homework even when the child does not ask for it, which could lead to diminished feelings of autonomy and competence. However, Silinskas et al. (2013, 2015) have conceptualized help and monitoring not in terms of their intrusiveness but rather based on how directly parents are involved in their children's homework. In the case of help, the level of direct involvement is high, in terms of the parent actively and directly helping the child with homework tasks by, for example, sitting next to the child and working on the task together. In the case of monitoring, in turn, the level of direct involvement is lower in terms of the parent making sure the child has done his/her homework by, for example, asking if the tasks are completed. Both help and monitoring, despite the different level of direct involvement, may diminish children's competence beliefs and feelings of being able to autonomously take care of their schooling. The present study will focus on all three dimensions of maternal homework assistance: autonomy granting, help, and monitoring following the conceptualization by Silinskas et al. (2013; 2015) where help and monitoring are distinguished based on the level of direct involvement.

The majority of previous literature has focused on the effect of homework assistance on children's skill development. However, the findings in the field are contradictory. Some of the findings have shown that both parental help (Cooper et al., 2000; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Silinskas et al., 2013) and monitoring (Patall et al., 2008; Silinskas et al., 2013) are negatively related to children's academic performance.

Some other studies have found a positive association between parental homework assistance and children academic performance. For instance, Pomerantz and Eaton (2001) found that mothers' help and monitoring were related to the improvement of performance over time. Moreover, in their meta-analysis, Patall et al. (2008) found a small but significant positive correlation between parental help in homework and students' academic achievement. Studies examining the role of autonomy granting have shown that granting autonomy in homework situations positively contributes to children's academic performance (Cooper et al., 2000; Ng et al., 2004).

One reason for these contradictory results may be related to the differences in how homework assistance is measured (e.g., frequency or quality; Moroni et al., 2015). Another reason, however, concerns factors that may contribute to the relations between homework assistance and children's academic achievement and skill development (see Patall et al., 2008). An example of these kinds of factors is children's motivation-related behavior, such as task persistence.

1.2. Homework assistance and children's task-persistent behavior

The important aspect of students' learning motivation is the way in which students behave when they face different kinds of learning tasks. The term "task-persistent behavior" refers to adaptive, on-task behavior in response to challenging academic tasks (e.g., Onatsu-Arviolommi & Nurmi, 2000). Children who show high task persistence put effort in and concentrate on tasks at hand, and they do not easily give up even when they face challenging tasks and difficulties (Aunola, Nurmi, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2002; Onatsu-Arviolommi & Nurmi, 2000). Task persistence is related to learning goals (Onatsu-Arviolommi & Nurmi, 2000) and it has repeatedly been found to be positively associated with academic skill development: Children who are persistent even in the face of challenges have better skills later on (e.g., Aunola, Nurmi, Lerkkanen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2003; Hirvonen, Georgiou, Lerkkanen, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2010; Onatsu-Arviolommi & Nurmi, 2000). The relationship between skill development and task-persistent behavior has actually been suggested to be reciprocal so that better skills also contribute to later task persistence (e.g., Aunola et al., 2002; Hirvonen et al., 2010). It is possible that when children have good skills, they also believe in their abilities which, then, helps them to be persistent in challenging tasks (e.g., Eccles, 2005; Eccles et al., 1983, pp. 75–146). Although previous literature has suggested that parental homework assistance is associated not only with children's skill development but also with their motivation-related behavior (Dumont et al., 2014, 2012; Leone & Richards, 1989; Shumow, 1998), studies examining the relations between homework assistance and children's task-persistent behavior are rare (for exceptions, see Dumont et al., 2014; Kikas & Silinskas, 2016; Silinskas & Kikas, 2017).

As stated earlier, according to the SDT, feelings of competence and autonomy are essential for motivated behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2008; see also; Aunola, Viljaranta, Lehtinen, & Nurmi, 2013; Deci et al., 1991). This framework has also been used to explain why different kinds of parental homework assistance practices affect children's skill development (Silinskas et al., 2013; 2015) and are also related to children's task-persistent behavior (Kikas & Silinskas, 2016; Silinskas & Kikas, 2017). Autonomy granting can increase children's motivation and effort in learning tasks (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci et al., 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000), because children's need for autonomy and competence are fulfilled when parents show trust in children's ability and willingness to take care of their homework autonomously. In general, autonomy-supportive parenting has been found to contribute to children's psychological need satisfaction (Soenens et al., 2007; Van Petegem, Zimmer-Gembeck, Soenens, & Zimmermann, 2017; Van der Kaap-Deeder, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Mabbe, 2015). Previous research has, indeed, shown that allowing children to solve problems by themselves enhances their intrinsic motivation, sense of autonomy and competence, and also their persistent behavior (Deci, Schwartz,

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