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COOPERATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND SCHOOLS FROM A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Numerous studies have proven the influence that cooperation between parents and schools has on student academic achievements (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2011). Research in this field indicates that a beneficial influence does not particularly depend on the quantity of such cooperation but rather on qualitative aspects (Pomerantz, Moorman & Litwack, 2007). In a quantitative study, 268 secondary school students in Germany were asked to give their opinions on obligatory student-teacher-parent conversations that had recently been introduced as a new form of assessment. The research question of this paper focuses on how students consider the presence of their parents in these conversations and on which attitudes and behavior on the parent side are considered to promote a fruitful cooperation. The initial results confirm the theoretically developed hypotheses: parental attitudes characterized by esteem and support towards their children correspond with positive evaluations of the concrete cooperation, while controlling behavior has a negative impact.

Keywords

parental involvement, student perspective, parent-school communication, learning development

Introduction

The family and the school are responsible for the education of children, with each sphere tending to different aspects in the individual educational development of the children. In doing so, interactions have to and do take place – sometimes more successfully, sometimes less so.

Changes have occurred in recent years within this cooperation between parents and schools, which can also be detected in the rhetoric employed. While earlier research on this topic applied the term *with parents*, the dominant expression today is of a *partnership between parents and schools* (Sacher, 2008; Stange, 2012). Parents are thought of more as equal partners in educational matters, and the ideal of a partnership is established in which mutual exchange leads to higher expertise for both groups. One stimulus for this development has been findings that prove the importance of parental involvement for successful school learning and development in their children (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2011; *PISA – Let´s Read Them a Story! The Parent Factor in Education*, 2012).

Along with these changes in the conceptualization of parent-school cooperation, new forms of cooperation have emerged. One example is student-teacher-parent conversations. This article examines this special kind of cooperation, in which students, teachers, and parents meet to talk about the student's development, focusing on the perspective of the students on this cooperation. What are their opinions about these conversations and especially about the fact that their parents are present during the conversations?

Student perspective on parental involvement in school

Several researchers have already examined the student perspective on parental involvement in schools in general. Edwards and Alldred (2000) developed a complex typology describing the possible reactions of children towards their parents' involvement in their school. Based on interviews with children from different schools in England, they established four categories for the activities of children in relation to parental involvement.

Category 1 sees "children as active in parental involvement" (Edwards & Alldred, 2000, p. 443). Students belonging to this category would support cooperation between their parents and the school actively, for example by motivating their parents to go to teacher-parent meetings or to help out at school parties. *Category 2* describes "children as passive in parental involvement." The students accept cooperation passively but do not especially motivate parents to cooperate with school. *Category 3* is for students who take

an active role in parental uninvolvement. This can mean students who advocate cooperation between parents and the school when the parents are not involved in school affairs, or on the other hand, it can mean students who discourage their parents from being involved in school affairs, for example by withholding information from them. Students who are passive in parental uninvolvement are grouped into *category 4*. They accept and appreciate that their parents are not involved in school affairs and do not make any effort to increase cooperation.

The German researcher Werner Sacher developed another typology based on a quantitative study. A negative or opposing position characterizes the largest group of students in his sample, which he divided into four different types using cluster analysis. The reactions among more than 2500 students from different types of schools in Bavaria (Germany) range from supporting parental involvement with reservation to opposing parental involvement (Sacher, 2008). Students of the first type *(supporter with reservation)* support parental involvement to a great extent but do not want their parents to be present in the school, for example when there is a social event such as a school-organized party. Students belonging to the second type *(supporter)* don't mind their parents being present in the school, but their support of parental involvement is not as high as that of the prior group. Type three *(skeptic)* holds a skeptical view of cooperation between parents and the school. Students belonging to type four *(opponents)* wish to be fully responsible for their school matters, avoiding parental involvement if possible (see Figure 1). In his study concerning different forms of parental involvement, Sacher also shows that student acceptance of parental involvement always increased when the students themselves played an active role in the cooperation.

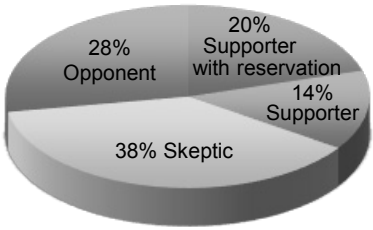

Figure 1
Four types of reactions to parental involvement and percentage of distribution among the students (Sacher, 2008)

Sacher (2008) also found that student support for parental involvement decreases with age and is generally lower in boys than in girls. These findings were also proven in the United Kingdom by Crozier (2000), who focused on two examples of parental involvement in a qualitative study: assistance with homework and parent-teacher conferences. The results of Crozier's analyses show that the younger the students, the more positive they were about parental help with their homework. Concerning parent-teacher conferences, the younger students were more dependent on parental support and liked their parents to have contact with the school (Crozier 2000, p. 107).

Student-teacher-parent conversations

This chapter presents existing research concerning student-teacher-parent conversations as a form of parental involvement. Even though student-teacher-parent conversations have a longer tradition in countries such as the USA and Sweden than in Germany, not much research exists on this topic. In the USA, these kind of conversations are called student-led conferences, hinting at their structure: it is the students themselves who lead the conversation (Hackmann, 1996). In Sweden, the conversations form part of an approach to learning that focuses on each individual and tries to provide the best support for each learner (Blossing, 2006; Söll, 2004). In Germany, this kind of shared communication has only recently been introduced as mandatory in some parts of the country. Bonanati (2014) and Kotthoff (2012) discovered in their qualitative studies that the conversations seem to strengthen the teachers' superior position and reinforce the existing hierarchy in schools.

Detailed research does exist on the broader issue of communication between parents and schools. Neuenschwander, Balmer, Gasser-Dutoit, Goltz, Hirt, and Ryser (2005) prove that three characteristics are crucial for successful communication: mutual trust, transmission of information, and coordination of further pedagogic steps. Even though their findings have not yet been examined against the specific case of student-teacher-parent conversations, they allow the assumption that it is not the quantity of interaction between parents and schools, but rather the quality of this interaction that might be crucial for successful cooperation. This assumption is supported by the results of Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007, p. 388), who found that "parents' involvement may be particularly beneficial for children when it is autonomy supportive, process focused, characterized by positive affect, or accompanied by positive beliefs".

Student-teacher-parent conversations in Hamburg, Germany

In 2010, obligatory student-teacher-parent conversations were introduced for all schools in Hamburg, Germany. The new law concerns students ages 6 to 16, who were initially required to attend two student-teacher-parent conversations per year. Because the conversations caused additional work for teachers and schools that they could not manage, the initial regulation was altered and the number of obligatory conversations within one school year was reduced from two to one in 2012. Details on the function and the content of the conversations are given in the Hamburg Law on Education, where it says under §44 (*performance assessment, reports*):

"Schools are obliged to inform the students and their parents regularly about individual learning progress and the achieved level of performance. Therefore, student-teacher-parent conversations have to take place at least once a year."[1]

A precise description of the contents is given in another legal document. Teachers, students, and parents should talk about:

1. "Individual learning progress,
2. Achieved level of performance in all subjects,
3. Non-subject related competencies,
4. Future learning processes and goals."[2]

Central research questions and data sources

The main research question addressed in this article is: What is the student perspective on cooperation between parents and schools as it takes place in student-teacher-parent conversations?

This can then be divided into two sub questions:

How do students evaluate the presence of parents in the conversations? and

What influences the evaluation of the presence of parents in the conversations?

To answer these questions, a quantitative study was conducted in the fall of 2013. A total of 268 students from three secondary schools in Hamburg, aged 13 on average, participated and filled in a questionnaire that asked for their reactions to the student-teacher-parent conversations and also for an evaluation of the behavior and the presence of the parents. The schools

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1 Translated from the Hamburg law on education, *Behörde für Schule und Berufsbildung* (2014b)

2 Translated from the regulations for schools in Hamburg, *Behörde für Schule und Berufsbildung* (2014a)

participating in the study were chosen based on the following criteria: They were all the same type of school ("Gymnasium"), since in Germany there are three different types of secondary schools; they all had developed a concept for conducting student-teacher-parent conversations that included having held one student-teacher-parent conversation in 2013/14; and the social background of the schools was similar. The students were chosen randomly since all of the 8th year students participated in the study. This school year was selected because it was assumed that at the age of 13 the presence of the parents in these conversations at the school could be a complicated issue for the students.

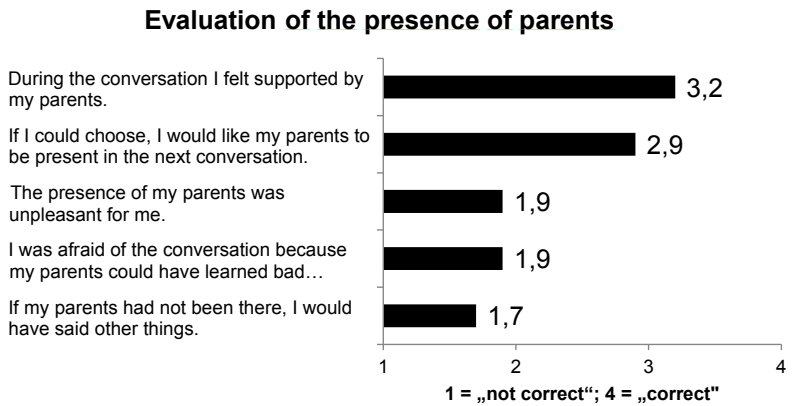
Findings

One result of the study is the information students provided about the speaking time during the conversations. The conversations lasted 22.6 minutes on average, with parents speaking 4.3 minutes, students 7.8 minutes, and teachers 10.5 minutes in the eyes of the students. This shows that the parents are not the most active participants in the conversations; however, it has to be assumed that their presence influences the conduct of the conversations.

Research question 1: How do students evaluate the presence of parents in the conversations?

To answer the first research question, a scale was created to measure how students evaluate the presence of their parents in the conversations. The scale consisted of the five items presented in Table 1 with their mean values.

Table 1
Items of the scale evaluation of the presence of the parents and mean values



Cronbach's Alpha for this scale is 0.8, and the mean value for the scale is 3.1 (SD 0.73) after reversing negative items. This result shows that the overall evaluation of the presence of the parents by these 268 students is rather positive (1 being the negative extreme, 4 the positive extreme, and 2.5 the statistical mean value).

Research question 2: What influences the evaluation of the presence of parents in the conversations?

The next step asked which factors influence the evaluation of the presence of the parents. Therefore, a multivariate linear regression analysis was conducted with eight potential factors entering the regression model (see Figure 2).

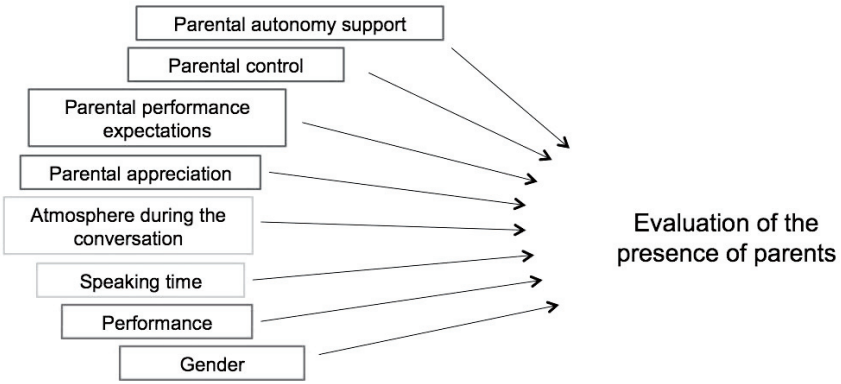


Figure 2
Model of the multivariate linear regression analysis

The first four factors concern parental attitudes and do not refer to parental behavior in the conversation but to general attitudes that parents display in their interaction with their children, mostly at home. They were adapted from existing instruments (Rakoczy, Buff, & Lipowsky, 2005; Stöber, 2002). The factor *atmosphere during the conversation* was new, based on findings by Neuenschwander et al. (2005). The factor *speaking time of the participants* consists of the reported time each of the participants spoke, and the factor *performance* was indicated by the student's grades.

Table 2 illustrates in detail the factors that were considered to be potentially influential. For every scale an example item is given, as well as the number of items it includes and the reliability as indicated by Cronbach's Alpha.

Table 2
Scales, internal consistency, and example items

Scale	Number of variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Example item
Parental autonomy support	7	0.7	"My parents respect that I have my own opinion."
Parental control	3	0.7	"My parents expect me to obey them."
Parental performance expectations	2	0.8	"My parents expect me to be among the best in my class."
Parental appreciation	7	0.9	"My parents like me the way I am."
Atmosphere during the conversation	6	0.8	"It was easy for me to say something in the conversation."

The results of the regression analysis are displayed in Table 3. It shows that 45% of the variance in the evaluation of the presence of the parents could be explained by three factors that became significant ($R^2 = 0.45$). The factor *atmosphere during the conversation* caused the highest effect (t = 6.31), followed by *parental support of autonomy* (t = 2.93) and *parental appreciation* (t = 2.35).

Table 3
Results of the regression analysis

Variables	B	SE(B)	β	t	Sig. (p)
Gender	–0.04	0.08	–0.03	–0.54	0.59
Performance	–0.06	0.05	–0.07	–1.24	0.22
Speaking time student	0.02	0.01	0.10	1.88	0.06
Speaking time parent(s)	0.01	0.01	0.05	0.92	0.36
Speaking time teacher	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.34	0.74
Atmosphere during the conversation	0.44	0.07	0.36	6.31	0.00
Parental autonomy support	0.24	0.08	0.19	2.93	0.00
Parental control	–0.05	0.06	–0.05	–0.86	0.39
Parental performance expectations	0.09	0.05	0.10	1.83	0.07
Parental appreciation	0.23	0.10	0.17	2.35	0.02

The interrelations are the following: The better the students considered the atmosphere during the conversation, the more content they were with their parents being present. Also, the more autonomy-supportive and appreciating parental behavior was considered, the more the students accepted the parental presence.

Two more factors almost became significant in the model: The speaking time of the student interrelated with the evaluation of the presence of the parents in the sense that the more the students themselves spoke, the more they appreciated the presence of the parents ($p = 0.06$). And finally, parental performance expectations were close to being significant ($p = 0.07$) in that the lower the performance expectations of the parents, the more students appreciated the parental presence.

Discussion and conclusion

The presented findings will be discussed and analyzed against the background of existing research.

Both the effect caused by parental attitudes (support of autonomy and appreciation) and the effect caused by the perceived atmosphere correspond to existing findings (Neuenschwander et al., 2005; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). The results of this study hence prove the relevance of qualitative aspects in parent-school cooperation, such as the atmosphere during the conversations, as well as the relevance of the attitudes parents apply in interactions with their child.

If one wants to relate these findings to the existing typologies of student positions towards parental involvement, an explanation of the high approval of parental involvement in student-teacher-parent conversations could be the fact that the examined kind of cooperation constitutes a form of parental involvement with high activity on the student side. The reported speaking time shows that the student speaks more on average than the parent(s). The result of the regression analysis also leads to the assumption that satisfaction with the parental presence depends on the role the students themselves have within the conversation: The more the student speaks, the higher their satisfaction. This corresponds to Sachers's findings that student contentedness with parental involvement increases when the students are involved in the cooperation. It also explains why the sample of students analyzed in this study would fit in one of the positive positions towards parental involvement, which are, according to Sacher and to Edwards and Alldred, not the dominant type.

In order to draw a conclusion for teaching practice, one could say that even with 13-year-old students, for whom interaction with their parents, especially concerning school-related issues, is not always free of conflicts, it is possible to create a partnership where the presence of parents in schools is accepted and appreciated. Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that not only situational aspects, such as the atmosphere during the conversation, but also factors concerning the student-parent relationship at home, outside the

school, proved to be crucial for interactions taking place in the school. To increase the acceptance of cooperation between parents and schools by the students, one should also work on these variables by fostering an autonomy-supportive attitude among the parents.

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