The Role of Parents in Schooling: Focus Groups as a Tool for Reflecting on Social Expectations and Individual Perceptions

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Abstract: In this article, I discuss how parents understand and perceive their role in secondary school education. With increasing expectations in contemporary society regarding successful life courses, most parents feel pressured to support their child's education and well-being in schooling. To examine the dynamic of social expectations and the perceptions of individuals' roles I used data from a German focus group study (N=25) and deliberately selected a group of three mothers with contrasting social and educational backgrounds. In addition to grounded theory methodology, I opted for methodological triangulation and included theoretical concepts from symbolic interactionism. Regardless of their background, I found the mothers had internalized the same high role expectations, but they differed in their perceptions of being able to fulfill them. Role conflicts were most obvious when there was a lack of knowledge and social resources. In these cases, help from the fathers as well as tutor and teacher contact supported meeting the demands of schooling. However, the mothers preferred to solve problems by themselves before contacting teachers. This could be due to distant or distrustful feelings towards teachers, which is important because the mothers' satisfaction with the school's performance was related to their concern for their child's well-being.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Parenting in Contemporary Societies

The idea that human life can be designed and planned was developed during modernization in industrialized societies and has gone hand in hand with an emphasis on the responsibility for one's own life course (BECK-GERNSHEIM, 1996; DEGELE & DRIES, 2005). People recognize that both family background and educational attainment determine future opportunities (HADJAR, 2008). Accordingly, social researchers have shown that childcare has changed: Parents are spending more time with their children (CHA & PARK, 2021; SULLIVAN, 2021) and are trying to manage and control educational progress (GARTMEIER, 2018). At the same time, maternal employment has increased and raising a child has become a planned project, putting greater pressure on parents (BECKER-SCHMIDT & KNAPP, 1985; JERGUS, KRÜGER & ROCH, 2018; WALPER & KREYENFELD, 2022; WRIGLEY, 1989). Researchers have provided strong evidence of intensification of parenting and rising pressure along the dimensions of investments in time, financial resources and children's education (e.g., CRAIG, POWELL & SMYTH, 2014; DOEPKE & ZILIBOTTI, 2019; ISHIZUKA, 2019; VINCENT & MAXWELL, 2016; WALPER & KREYENFELD, 2022). Specific time and financial expectations are likely to have increased with parents' desire that their children pursue a higher level of education (ALBERTINI & RADL, 2012; DUNCAN & MURNANE, 2011; SAYER, BIANCHI & ROBINSON, 2004). In the face of growing social inequality, it is understandable that those parents who see schooling as a key factor to success in life invest intensively in individual support at home or with additional programs (BUTTERWEGGE, 2020; FEND, BERGER & GROB, 2009; OECD, 2024). This seems to be especially true for highly educated parents who may want to introduce their children to activities and programs that will help prepare them for college or a career (RAMEY & RAMEY, 2010). When confronted with income inequality in industrialized countries, it has been argued that strong investment in children's education is a way for middle-class parents to preserve their social status (NAPOLITANO, PACHOLOK & FURSTENBERG, 2014). However, the extent to which parental education levels are related to time investment remains ambiguous (CHA & PARK, 2021), and though norms vary among parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds, behavioral changes in parenting over time can be observed in general (ALTINTAS, 2016; DOTTI SANI & TREAS, 2016). The educational pressure that parents feel related to their responsibilities tends to be independent of their socioeconomic status in Germany, and support from the public school seems to play an important role to meet the educational demands (WALPER & KREYENFELD, 2022). There is a lack of all-day programs[1] for students so that parents often feel pressured to help with homework and individual learning at home (ALT et al., 2020; HÜSKEN, 2015). [1]

In terms of gender, mothers in particular feel that they must do everything possible to create the best conditions for their child (KOHLER, ALDRIDGE, CHRISTENSEN & KILGO, 2012; NOMAGUCHI & MILKIE, 2020; SCHNEIDER, DIABATÉ & RUCKDESCHEL, 2015). Compared to the father, they provide the

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1   In Germany, half-day school, with lessons given in the morning, as opposed to all-day school is the most common way of organizing lessons.

majority of school-related support (GERBER & WILD, 2009) and generally report higher levels of cognitive and affective involvement in their child's development (ALDONEY & PRIETO, 2023). Nevertheless, the "cultural shift in childcare" and the new social norm of "good" or "intensive parenting" (SCHULZ & STEINBACH, 2023, p.478)[2] comprise more involved parental practices by both mothers and fathers (CHA & PARK, 2021) but with greater continuity over time among women than men (GE GAO, 2022). The importance of mothers in the school context is supported by the fact that the overall proportion of female parents in educational studies is high (HELM, HUBER & LOISINGER, 2021; ULRICH & HACHFELD, 2022). Given this, it can be assumed that mothers are particularly affected by the increasing pressure to adequately educate their children and face a variety of challenges (e.g., IVANOVA-CHESSEX, 2022; ULRICH & HACHFELD, 2024). However, the dynamic of social expectations and parents' perceptions of their role in schooling has not been sufficiently investigated. To understand decisions of investment under the pressure of competitive societies from individuals' points of view, qualitative research is insightful. This is where I started with my research. [2]

I begin with the topic of social role and identity theory and parents as the primary caregivers. Despite changes in employment, mothers still assume most responsibility for their children's education in heterosexual couples. Therefore, they also play a central role in working with teachers (Section 2). I focus first on empirical findings on different forms of parental involvement. There is evidence that parents' effectiveness in helping with schooling tasks depends on factors such as their educational qualifications and whether their children feel they are being controlled and if they enjoy parental help (Section 3). I explain the research interest and guiding questions of this article in relation to the dynamics of individual perceptions, behaviors and role conflicts (Section 4), followed by an account of the methodology, sampling and data collection as well as the qualitative analysis. This is based on partial data: A small focus group of three mothers from a larger German interview study. In Step 1, grounded theory methodology was applied to the overall data sample of five focus groups. Using methodological triangulation, key concepts of symbolic interactionism theory were used in deductive Step 2, to examine the group of three with different family and educational backgrounds (Section 5). The analyses are then presented in line with the research questions. [3]

Overall, the mothers spoke of educational pressure and unresolved problems in the family-school relationship. The single mother with less educational qualifications seemed to feel particularly stressed by trying to live up to her parental expectations for herself, while the two others reported effective learning strategies and routines at home as heterosexual couples (Section 6). Finally, a discussion of the findings is presented, concluding with an account of the methodology. To ensure that increasing pressures on parents do not disrupt their children's learning and educational progress, it is essential to thematize and reflect on parents' general roles as well as that with regards to schooling. [4]

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2   All translations from non-English texts are mine.

Qualitative methodological triangulation was found to have great potential for exploring social expectations, individual role perceptions and conflicts. Using this triangulated approach with inductive grounded theory categorization and deductive concepts of symbolic interactionism theory, it is possible to obtain new thematic, subject-orientated and theory-based insights regarding the role of parents, how they perceive themselves and how they express role conflicts in light of social inequalities and educational pressures in contemporary society (Section 7). [5]

2. Social Identity Theory and the Parental Role

In lifelong socialization, individuals adopt social roles by observing others and internalizing the social expectations represented by important reference groups. Social roles and attitudes are not fixed but continually developed through social interactions (MEAD, 1968 [1934]). According to the theory of social identity within symbolic interactionism theory that is focused on the meanings individuals ascribe to objects, events, and interactions in their social environment, there are three differentiated theoretical concepts: Me, I and The Self (ibid.; see also HELLE, 2001; JOAS, 1989). The "Me" is the social component of an individual's role, shaped by the society in which a person lives. It comes into conflict with external expectations and with the way in which other people perceive a person. The concept of "I" is the psychological component, where the creative and impulsive emotions and actions of the individual take place (e.g., we perceive an accusation as unjustified or a request as inappropriate). These reactions are expressions of the "I" feeling misunderstood and demanding dissent. The third theoretical construct, the "Self," emerges from the interplay between the "I" and "Me" and individual processes of experience and development. It is not a static construct, but is constantly in flux, reflecting an individual's self-perception and self-concept (HELLE, 2001; JOAS, 1989; MEAD, 1968 [1934]). [6]

In recent decades, there has been a marked shift in societal attitudes regarding women's roles, with increasing emphasis on gender equality and the rejection of traditional family norms (SCHULZ & STEINBACH, 2023). However, despite changes in employment and domestic work in heterosexual relationships, gendered patterns of household and childcare responsibilities persist, both within couple relationships and at the societal level (SULLIVAN, GERSHUNY & ROBINSON, 2018). In Germany, mothers are the primary caregivers of children from preschool through adulthood (LOTT, 2024). In addition, there has long been a discourse on diversity, and the concept of family has been redefined as an expression of diverse living arrangements. However, families that deviate from the norm of heterogeneity are underrepresented in research and often not explicitly recognized (FISCHER & DE VRIES, 2023; NAY, 2019; RUPP & HAAG, 2016). Nevertheless, there is evidence that same-sex couples' roles are not genderless. Considering the strong associations of mothers with housework and childcare and of fathers with paid work, same-sex couples can be seen to conduct their relationships within a larger heteronormative context that has historically assigned gendered values to different tasks (EVERTSSON, ERIKSSON KIRSCH & GEERTS, 2021). [7]

With regard to parental involvement in schooling, there must be a clear understanding of what parents' role is and how to work with teachers and community groups (EPSTEIN et al., 2002). Concerning contemporary educational policies, the members of *Kultusministerkonferenz* (KMK) [Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs] in Germany emphasized that parents and teachers bear responsibility for the individual development and learning success of children and adolescents (KMK, 2018). However, it seems quite challenging to cultivate such educational cooperation. International researchers have identified a number of barriers to parental involvement, including individual and institutional factors in families and schools (e.g., GOMOLLA, 2009; HORNBY & BLACKWELL, 2018; SACHER, 2022). Depending on parents' understanding of their roles, their time and cognitive resources, their perceptions of the school system and teachers reaching out (e.g., individual feedback conversations or parents' evenings) and the extent that the children accept their involvement, parental engagement in school cooperation varies (ANDERSON & MINKE, 2007; GREEN, WALKER, HOOVER-DEMPSEY & SANDLER, 2007; HARRIS & GOODALL, 2007; HORNBY & LAFAELE, 2011; REINIGER & SANTANA-LÓPEZ, 2017). A positive relationship has also been found between parental self-efficacy and parental involvement (BRODY, FLOR & GIBSON, 1999; COOPER, LINDSAY & NYE, 2000; HOOVER-DEMPSEY et al., 2005). Overall, the fit between an individual family and a child's school (whether the relation is more harmonious and supportive or more antagonistic and conflicted) is crucial to shaping the educational processes in both the home and school learning environments (IVANOVA-CHESSEX, 2020; OEVERMANN, 2001; WILD & LORENZ, 2010). [8]

3. Parental Involvement in Schooling

The parental role, being aware of one's responsibilities such as supporting one's child in schooling, is considered important for educational success in all grades (SMITH, SHERIDAN, KIM, PARK & BERETVAS, 2020; TÄSCHNER, HOLZBERGER & HILLMAYR, 2021). Parents may be involved in a variety of ways: Communicating with teachers, attending special events, being a member of the PTA (Parent Teacher Association), discussing educational issues with the child at home, monitoring progress by checking homework or organizing after-school study time. Even if parental role expectations are shared, individuals differ in the frequency and forms of participation in school-based and home-based involvement (EPSTEIN et al., 2002; GREEN et al., 2007; LaROCQUE, KLEIMAN & DARLING, 2011; SACHER, 2022). In Germany, researchers found that parents were very committed to supporting their children, e.g., helping with homework and sharing in learning in preparation for in-class tests (AUTOR:INNENGRUPPE BILDUNGSBERICHTERSTATTUNG, 2020; KILLUS & PASEKA, 2016; LUPLOW & SMIDT, 2019). More than half of parents also stated that they feel responsible for that which they believe should be the school's responsibility,[3] particularly individual learning support after school (ARNOLDT & STEINER, 2015). As a result, parents

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3 See *Pressemappe: 4. JAKO-O Bildungsstudie* [Press Kit: 4th JAKO-O Education Study], https://cdn.jako-o.com/content/LP/2017/bildungsstudie/JAKO-O_Bildungsstudie-2017_Pressemappe.pdf [Accessed: November 25, 2023].

were "partners," cooperating with teachers but also have to compensate for what are perceived as shortcomings in school education, especially when their children were under-performing (KILLUS & PASEKA, 2016). [9]

International researchers have found that the quality of parental involvement greatly drives increases in children's educational attainment (DETTMERS, YOTYODYING & JONKMANN, 2019; DUMONT, TRAUTWEIN, NAGY & NAGENGAST, 2014; KATZ, KAPLAN & BUZUKASHVILY, 2011; MORONI, DUMONT, TRAUTWEIN, NIGGLI & BAERISWYL, 2015; POMERANTZ, MOORMAN & LITWACK, 2007). In this regard, it is important to note that parental engagement at home can also result in diminished academic performance and familial disharmony (MORONI et al., 2015). Parents with less education tend to provide inadequate learning support at home whereas those with more education act more as experts like teachers (MARCUS, SPIESS, WAIGHTS & JUDY, 2021) and rarely express uncertainty in schooling questions (VODAFONE STIFTUNG DEUTSCHLAND, 2015). Given that the education system has been found to be a driving force in the reproduction of social inequalities (BOURDIEU & PASSERON, 1973 [1970]; WÖSSMANN, SCHONER, FREUNDL & PFAEHLER, 2023), this emphasizes the need for teachers to respond sensitively, through effective communication and counseling, so that a lack of adequate parental support does not lead to educational disadvantages (e.g., RUTTER & WEITKÄMPER, 2022). The benefits are obvious in limited research; e.g., secondary school students reported more intrinsic motivation in learning when their parents contacted teachers when offered (RUBACH, LAZARIDES & LOHSE-BOSSENZ, 2019). [10]

Clearer than before, researchers found that during the COVID-19 pandemic individual parent-teacher communication, e.g., via telephone, e-mail and anonymous questionnaires, was fundamental to effectively support home-based learning (BASTIAN & PRASSE, 2021; KILLUS & PASEKA, 2021; TÄSCHNER et al., 2021). Correlations were also found between parents' perceived communication quality with teachers and parental self-concept, role strain and role behavior as a child's learning partner in the context of distance learning (ULRICH & HACHFELD, 2022). Further, researchers have suggested that school-based learning guidance and effective parent-teacher communication in times of online lessons lead to better schooling support at home, with engaged teacher behavior fostering better parental help for their child, particularly in families with less education (SANDER, SCHÄFER & VAN OPHUYSEN, 2021). Overall, researchers have found that the extent and form of parental involvement are strongly influenced by family social class, maternal level of education, material deprivation, maternal psycho-social health, single parent status and, to a lesser degree, family ethnicity (DESFORGES & ABOUCHAAR, 2003). Parents' social-emotional support and belief in their child's abilities has a positive influence on school performance, while close parental control has a negative effect (CASTRO et al., 2015; FAN & CHEN, 2001; JEYNES, 2012; WILDER, 2014; WILSON FADIJI & REDDY, 2023). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also determined that greater parental emotional support was associated with higher test scores in PISA (Programme for

International Student Assessment) and greater subjective well-being, with little variation due to parental education (OECD, 2024). [11]

4. Understanding Parental Support and Role Conflicts

In light of the current norm of intensive parenting, the pressures involved and the potential for effective parental involvement in the school context, it is important to understand parents' perspectives individually and in depth. Despite changes in the roles and employment of women in heterosexual couples (SCHULZ & STEINBACH, 2023), mothers seem to be particularly affected by pressures and social role expectations in the schooling context as they continue to bear the majority of responsibility (e.g., GERBER & WILD, 2009). So far, however, we do not know exactly how individual parents of school-age children perceive and describe social expectations in the face of increased demands and time, financial and educational pressure (WALPER & KREYENFELD, 2022). There is a need to explore why they choose to take on additional educational tasks at home, even if they feel overwhelmed or believe it is the teachers' responsibility (KILLUS & PASEKA, 2016). In view of the differences in parental status and other resources such as knowledge and time, it can be assumed that taking on this special responsibility in schooling not only leads to selective individual stress but also to role conflicts. These are to be expected, especially for mothers in heterosexual families, who tend to take primary responsibility for educating children at home. Theoretically, role conflicts usually arise when individuals seek psychological balance due to discrepancies between the social expectations of reference groups or institutions and their internal expectations of themselves (DAHRENDORF, 2006; WISWEDE, 1977). [12]

In order to examine the parents' role in schooling sufficiently from the individuals' point of view, and with regard to perceived social expectations, the use of a qualitative research methodology would be beneficial. Given that children's educational biography is linked with parents' social status (e.g., DUMONT, MAAZ, NEUMANN & BECKER, 2014; WÖSSMANN et al., 2023), it is important to consider parents with contrasting backgrounds in research. As explained, mothers play a central role, so I decided to focus on their perspective and explore the following questions.

• How do mothers explain internalized social role expectations in schooling?
• How do mothers deal with individual role conflicts in schooling? [13]

5. Methods

This paper is based on the comprehensive results of a focus group study, called *Familien-Schul-Kooperation zu Beginn der Sekundarstufe I: zum Aufgabenverständnis von Müttern und zur Bedeutung ihrer Passungswahrnehmung* [Family-School-Cooperation at the Beginning of Lower Secondary Education] that took place in Baden-Württemberg, Germany (ULRICH & HACHFELD, 2024). The study focused on the perspectives of single and co-habiting mothers of fifth graders (age 11-12) and on the issues of parental responsibility and the distribution of tasks in successful education regarding the relationship between family and school. In June 2021, the focus group interviews (120 min each) were conducted online via a video conferencing tool. The data were based on five focus groups (N=25). [14]

The key questions of the guide were asked in such a way that the mothers' reasons for doing particular schooling tasks at home could be examined, as well as their self-perception and their perception of school fit at the beginning of lower secondary education. The overall grounded theory analyses showed that the mothers in all groups shared a general understanding of what specific tasks the family and/or teachers would have to take on in order to support the child's schooling. The mothers also agreed on the need to provide individual support due to structural deficiencies at school. In addition to contextual conditions, teacher prompts, perceived child support needs, family routines in learning and communication, previous school experiences and mothers' role beliefs, social norms and goal orientations explained their decisions in acting as a supporter at home. Interrelations between maternal self-perception and their perception of school fit point to the key role of teachers in coping with their own perceptions of maternal role strain (ULRICH & HACHFELD, 2024). The overall study was subject to university research ethics approval. [15]

5.1 Sampling and data collection

In the planning of the sample of four groups, characteristics such as "mothers of fifth graders" were determined according to a top-down strategy (DOPPLER & STEFFEN, 2019, p.20; see also "purposive sampling" by SCHREIER, 2011, p.246). I had planned for one group of ethnic German mothers with limited education, a second group of ethnic German mothers with more education, a third group of mothers with various other ethnic backgrounds (who did not experience the German school system as children themselves), and a fourth group of ethnic German mothers with various educational backgrounds. However, in the end, five focus groups were conducted because of spontaneous cancellations by individual mothers in the group that included ethnic German mothers with various educational backgrounds. Moreover, I decided to construct artificial groups (where mothers did not know one another as their children were not in the same schools) because it can be assumed that the participants then have fewer inhibitions about talking about sensitive topics and are less reticent when conflicts arise (MORGAN, 1997). [16]

Recruitment was carried out in cooperation with the Ipsos' Social Research Institute of Berlin to be able to reach different social milieus as well as urban and rural regions of the federal state of Baden-Württemberg. In collaborative online meetings, we developed a telephone screening protocol according to the characteristics of the theoretical sample. To ensure research quality in an online interview setting, it was consciously decided that an expert from Ipsos, trained in holding focus groups in family research, took on the role of the moderator. Thus, we also discussed the semi-structured interview guide using open-ended questions. In each interview discussion, I assumed the role of an observer, taking notes and assisting the moderator via chat if interviewees' individual statements required clarification (FALTER et al., 2022; LEITHÄUSER, 2009). This cooperative role sharing made it possible to reflect on my subjectivity immediately with the moderator. Further, this division of tasks and roles within the interview proved to be advantageous, as I gained a better overview of the group dynamics and could consult the moderator in order to formulate specific follow-up questions. After each interview, we shared our perceptions as moderator and observer according to conspicuous reactions of individual mothers and important interview passages. These reflections ensure the quality of the research process with internal and external transparency (FLICK, 1995, 2019; TIMONEN, FOLEY & CONLON, 2024; YADAV, 2021). [17]

The recruited mothers were informed in writing about the audio interview and data protection laws, which, among other things, guarantee confidentiality. They confirmed their voluntary participation in writing and were given information about the interview topic. The interviews (120 minutes each) were conducted online using a video conferencing tool. The moderator explained anonymity and my silent observing presence as project coordinator at the beginning of each interview. It was clear that I would not participate or interrupt the interview. After the moderator's welcoming comments, the mothers introduced themselves personally, mentioning their first names, age, occupation, hobbies, characteristics of their family situation (e.g., number of children, place of residence, marital status, pets) and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, school closure and online lessons. Mothers were also asked to describe their child as a fifth grader, individual family challenges in relation to schooling and their views on what constitutes "successful" education and "good" motherhood in addition to the barriers they perceived to achieving these goals. In addition, the interviews focused on the specific responsibilities that mothers attributed to themselves or to their child's teachers in promoting the fifth graders successful education. As a visual aid, the mothers drew a horizontal line with two opposite poles (school/teacher and home/parent) on a sheet of paper and wrote down various tasks that came to mind (e.g., homework support, preparing for tests and learning together, motivational support, mental health and digital learning). [18]

In addition to the transcripts, the visualizations that were developed with the participants during the discussion were also analyzed and used to support the findings (SCHULZ, 2012). Mothers were asked about specific requests to change the current division of tasks and collaboration with teachers, and they discussed their opinions. Each interview ended with a final reflection on the shared interview

process. Overall, the interview guide helped orient the moderator and participants in accordance with the principle of openness. This way the mothers determined the course of the interview by establishing different topics seen as relevant, but they still kept to the discussion points important for the leading research questions (BENIGHAUS & BENIGHAUS, 2012; HELFFERICH, 2011). [19]

KRUEGER (1994) defined focus groups as conversations organized to gather data on a specific topic from participants in a friendly, non-threatening environment, strengthening the atmosphere of the discussion as a catalyst for data collection. Participants have the opportunity to express their ideas but also to form and modify them as the discussion develops. As MORGAN (1997) stated, "an emphasis on perspectives brings together attitudes, opinions and experiences in an effort to find out not only what participants think about an issue but also how they think about it, and why they think the way they do" (p.20). Overall, group interviews are particularly well suited to capturing the discourse among actors in the field on a specific topic (THOMAS, 2020). Furthermore, focus groups can facilitate the collaboration of participants who might be afraid in individual settings (KITZINGER, 1995). In total, 25 mothers of school-aged children (11 or 12 years-old) participated in the study in June of 2021. For the purpose of the current article, I used partial data (a selected focus group with mothers of different social and educational background) to provide deeper insights into internalized social role expectations, individual perceptions and role conflicts as the parents of a fifth grader. In Germany, this grade is one year after the transition from elementary school to secondary school. At this age, children are at different stages of development: Some are already independent in educational learning while others need parental help—mothers in particular take over this supporting task (MARCUS et al., 2021). [20]

5.2 Data analyses

The audiovisual recordings were taped and fully transcribed (DRESING & PEHL, 2018). Using the f4transkript and f4analyse software, data analyses were conducted according to grounded theory methodology which includes three levels of coding (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 1990; see also FLICK, 1995). In open coding (Level 1), various educational content and aims, maternal experiences in schooling, role perceptions and actions of parents, children and teachers from the mothers' perspective as well as mothers' criticism and wishes according to the school system were conceptually labeled and compared within and between focus groups for similarities and differences. In axial coding (Level 2), I condensed the material into core categories and subcategories that reflect the mothers' understanding of the parental role in the secondary school context. This was reflected in statements on specific tasks and on the role behaviors of parents and teachers that promote education. [21]

To analyze parents' individual behaviors and reasons for taking over responsibility in schooling, I used the CORBIN and STRAUSS (1990) paradigm to identify the primary conditions, contexts, action strategies and consequences of individual decisions from a parental perspective. I created initial codes and concepts for the

entire dataset and addressed specific questions in the transcripts which were oriented towards the structure of human action (BOEHM, 1994). I found that maternal role beliefs (i.e., to what extent and why they feel responsible), family routines (e.g., regular talks about learning contents), goal orientations (e.g., academic achievement, well-being), teacher prompts (e.g., explicit demands to support children's education at parent-teacher conferences) and previous experiences with primary school (i.e., quality of counseling by teachers) can explain mothers' individual role behavior. Then, using the theoretical memos, I reflected on the condensed data in preparation for selective coding (Level 3), the final process by which all categories are unified around a central core category (CORBIN & STRAUSS, 1990). [22]

First, I focused on maternal self-perception and the perceived fitting with the school (ULRICH & HACHFELD, 2024). Analyzing interrelations between mothers' expressed quality of self-perception (features of mental balance versus role strain) and the perceived fit with the school (harmonious relationship versus antagonistic relationship), I created a two-dimensional illustration with contrasting characteristics and their interrelationships (BOEHM, 1994). In this visualization, I categorized the mothers' statements. As the self-perceptions of individual mothers differed to some extent according to the tasks they took on, assumptions about general correlations should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, I found that mothers who expressed features of positive self-perception often did not seek contact with teachers due to a lack of time or trust. Mothers who reported having fewer social or educational resources (e.g., single mothers, lack of school knowledge, native language other than German) reported some positive and some negative experiences of individual contact with teachers from whom they expected support. Individual mothers who felt overburdened, who did not mention any successful strategies for learning support at home and who perceived the teachers as distant were found to be in the most unfavorable situation. With regard to the entire coding process, I reflected on the interim results of the analytical steps with social and educational scientists, inside and outside my university, through presentations and in qualitative research workshops (FLICK, 2019; HELFFERICH, 2011). [23]

After these overall analyses and the presentation of the results of the preliminary data-based theory with systematic contrasting and visualization, I recognized a high level of reflection within the mixed-group discussion of three mothers of different social and educational backgrounds. With open, authentic and respectful conversations with explicit statements at a meta level of communication in the way that mothers reflect on themselves, this focus group was well suited for in-depth analysis of individual role perceptions and conflicts in light of social inequalities and pressures the participants perceive in Germany. Because of these qualities, I chose methodological triangulation by supplementing the very open grounded theory analysis (Step 1) with a deductive approach (Step 2), using the main concepts of the theory of symbolic interactionism (HELLE, 2001; JOAS, 1989), derived from the theory of social identity (MEAD, 1968 [1934]). In the category of "Me," I include social role expectations as expressed by the mothers, internalized over life-long socialization. The spontaneous feelings and opinions

the mothers expressed in the context of individual role perceptions are part of the category "I." In the category "Self," I include reflected individual role processes and characteristics of role identities in light of internalized expectations and perceived demands. The theory of symbolic interactionism has not yet been combined with methods of qualitative social research in interview analysis, but it can be assumed that this will enrich the interpretation of the results (TÖPFER & BEHRMANN, 2021). [24]

In general, methodological triangulation is a strategy used to better analyze the complexity of a research topic than one method alone could (FLICK, 2011). Therein, different methods are used within and outside of the methodological approach (DENZIN, 1970). Regarding the present study's analyses, the triangulation of inductive grounded theory analysis and deductive theoretical differentiation is irreversible in its sequence. The very open analysis of the overall data material proved to be a pivotal moment in the development of the subsequent idea of triangulation and the application of deductive categories. While a deductive approach alone runs the risk of overlooking new and important aspects spontaneously expressed by the interviewees themselves, the inductive categories represent the beginning of the analysis and are intended to capture the essence of the meanings and experiences of the respective material (BREUER, MUCKEL & DIERIS, 2019; STRAUSS, 1998 [1991]). [25]

6. Findings and Interpretation

First, I describe the individual backgrounds of the three mothers whose focus group discussion and individual statements I refer to in order to answer the research questions presented at the end of Section 3. Following this, I present the inductive grounded theory analyses. Finally, the current findings of methodological triangulation are presented, the deductive process using the concepts of symbolic interactionism as three main categories ("Me," "I" and "Self"). [26]

6.1 Individual backgrounds

At the time of the interview, Anne[4] was 39 years old, had a high school degree and worked full-time as an industrial clerk. She lived with her husband and two daughters (5th and 7th grade) in an urban region in Germany. Both girls attend *Gymnasium* [university-track high school]. Financial pressure was no issue in the family. She also displayed individual competences in dealing with time management and the perceived pressure of the educational system. [27]

Mia was 38 years old, had a university degree and worked as a mindfulness therapist. She lived together with her partner and their only child, a daughter in the fifth grade in the first year of *Realschule* [vocational-track schooling]. In the interview, Mia reported no time pressure with regard to her job and home-based learning support. Financial issues were also no issue in her statements but

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4   All names (Anne, Mia, Cora) are fictitious.

pressure from the educational system was expressed. She had high expectations of herself as an individual coach when her daughter needs help or motivation in schooling context. [28]

Cora was 36 years old and had a middle-school education. She was a stay-at-home parent with part-time employment (delivering newspapers) and a single mother of one son in the fifth grade of *Gymnasium* [university-track high school] and another son who was two years old. Her statements in the interview indicated that she was under financial strain, struggling to buy a computer and a printer for online lessons during COVID-19. She also expressed educational pressure seeing that she did not have the skills and knowledge to support her son in doing homework. Time pressure was not an issue for her in the context of employment, but she had difficulties in managing the care of her two children. During the COVID-19 pandemic and related distance learning, she asked her mother (the grandmother) to babysit the younger son. [29]

6.2 Mothers' internalized social expectations

According to the first research question, the category "Me" was crucial to how mothers explained internalized social expectations according to their role in schooling. In this category, generalizations such as "you [as parents] can ...," "you have to ..." and "parents should ..." were typically used. In addition to the "Me" category, the "I" category was of utmost importance in analyzing differences in individual role perceptions and situated role behavior in homework or other learning support at home. In this category, spontaneous statements were made about the internalized role expectations and associated feelings in light of the perceived demands. [30]

The following is an example from Anne, who expressed challenges after COVID-19 distance learning. Her explanation of what she and her husband had done to support their children's learning process was in line with her overall internalized social expectations of parents' role in schooling.

> "Anne: *You* [as parents] can also organize private tutoring, for example. If *you* notice the child's grades are getting worse or learning gaps are appearing, *you can* consciously ask other students if they can give private lessons. That is the way we went.
>
> Moderator: And has that also been an issue after COVID-19?
>
> Anne: Yes, in principle, yes. *You have to reflect* again and again, definitely." [5] [31]

Given the strong requirement that parents "have to reflect again and again," the wording "you can" could also mean "you should," as this was how Anne expressed what is expected of parents in schooling. Moreover, by using the pronoun "we," Anne expressed that she and her husband shared the responsibility of supporting their children's education. Elsewhere, she used "mom

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5   All emphases in italics are mine unless otherwise noted. Insertions are always in square brackets. All quotations from interviews have been translated into English.

and dad" when describing her understanding of social expectations of parental roles. This language may indicate that she had internalized non-gendered role expectations and lived in an equal partnership. Below, I give another example of Anne describing the role expectations she had internalized and how her and her partner were realizing the expectations.

> "Anne: What I think in terms of *parents: They should definitely* be there for the child, in terms of homework support or supervision for test preparation. ... To be honest, we only test the children's knowledge before tests. But theoretically, if you were more diligent or had more time, *you could* do it between [tests] or during homework, for example." [32]

In addition, Anne emphasized the importance of parent-child communication and family routines. These were suggested to be an important part of the parental role in schooling before problems arise and parents need to talk to teachers or seek other advice:

> "Anne: Asking at family dinner about what was difficult in school today, if there is still something to do, to solve, are you up to date [about the schooling task]—this kind of personal communication with one's children is important." [33]

Like Anne, Mia emphasized that parents need to take a key role in supporting their children to learn and "definitely" bear responsibility for schooling at home. She expected parents to rely on their abilities and be open to learning themselves when they reached their limits in certain subjects. This is expressed in the following example:

> "Mia: Well, I think it is *definitely the parents' responsibility* to give the child the best possible support at home and to prepare the child as well as possible for life. That also includes jointly preparing before tests and maybe learning things *yourself as parents* because you don't know or finding someone who knows things that you don't know yourself. There are possibilities." [34]

Both Mia and Anne were very clear about their expectations of the role of parents in schooling. At the same time, they showed awareness that fulfilling the ideal parental role would require a high level of commitment and flexible management on the part of parents, as Mia explained.

> "Mia: Learning together [in addition to everyday school lessons], that's actually *ideally a task for the parents* that they create the space, take the time." [35]

Like Anne, Mia lived in a traditional household and shared responsibility in learning support with the father. However, in Mia's case, she took on the main role as long as she could meet the demands in schooling. This became clear in the following example:

> "Mia: It always seemed solvable to me, as I have the knowledge [for schooling], except math, which my husband or the private tutor help with." [36]

Here, the father supported his child in mathematics because Mia felt overwhelmed by this subject. In contrast, following an acrimonious separation, Cora was a single mother, and the father did not share responsibilities in parenting and schooling. Furthermore, when it came to the private tutoring, mentioned by Anne and Mia, Cora was reluctant. With regard to digital learning equipment, it became rather clear that Cora felt stressed by the need to buy a computer, a printer and "100 tons of printer cartridges." When describing the parental role in schooling, Cora expressed internalized social expectations in a slightly different way, referring to individual children's skills. This is illustrated in the following example:

> "Cora: At home, I think *it is important that parents look after it* [the homework]. I think in the fifth grade, it often depends on whether the parents really look after it. Of course, there are *children who are already very, very independent*, so it doesn't have to be like that [requiring parental control]. But overall, I think it often depends on the parental engagement. ... I think *you should* check regularly and go through the tasks together with the child. And then *maybe* reward accordingly if it is done well so that one's child is motivated to keep going." [37]

While both Mia and Anne clearly explained how they successfully fulfilled internalized role expectations in schooling, Cora did not give any situational examples that reflected successful strategies or routines in shared learning at home. Instead, she mentioned stressful situations. For example, referring to her son's development in distance learning, Cora remembered that he was not able to learn independently and she felt overwhelmed: "It was incredibly stressful [for me to help my son with the schooling tasks] because *I had to control everything*." Furthermore, both Mia and Anne had described the parental role here as a companion or supervisor: Preparing for tests together with the child and providing individual support with homework. In comparison, Cora expressed internalized role expectations more in terms of controlling or checking tasks and homework. At the same time, it was noticeable that Cora was less certain in her voice and language (e.g., "maybe" instead of "definitely"). [38]

Overall, all three mothers had internalized the expectation of high parental involvement at home and noted different schooling tasks that they (as parents) should do. However, it should be kept in mind that taking on the role of parent in schooling does not mean you are competent. While both Mia and Anne felt confident in taking on the parental role, sharing the responsibility of providing support with their husband or paying for private tutoring, Cora struggled with the expectations of assessing and providing educational support. Her doubts and worries were expressed in the following statement.

> "Cora: Basically, I agree with her [Anne], but it is not fair. ... Because you cannot assume that all parents have the knowledge to help their child. At a certain point, it may become too difficult for some parents and then, they will not be able to comprehend what their children are working on. And, I see that problem now as a single parent. ... Preparing and studying for tests should therefore also be possible at

school ... if parents are not able to do this so that these children have the same opportunities." [39]

Given that some parents cannot support their child in higher levels of secondary school due to a lack of abilities and knowledge, home-based learning support was considered crucial in the context of social inequality. Parental education and other issues such as financial stress and single parenting may be associated with deviations from internalized social role expectations. This is what Cora expressed several times in the interview discussion. During the interview, Anne was sensitive to the fact of educational disadvantages and emphasized the responsibility of schools to compensate for the lack of parental knowledge or professional support.

"Anne: We also have all kinds of support programs that the children can use at school. ... We don't use them personally, but they are there. And I think that's right and important." [40]

In comparison, Mia was more critical of the belief that "there are opportunities." She emphasized the responsibility of parents in education and found it difficult to let go of her internalized high role expectations. Overall, all three mothers emphasized that parental involvement is crucial to ongoing monitoring of children's school education. They had the idea that a high level of parental involvement in home-based activities such as homework help, shared study time and private tutoring for lower-achieving children are beneficial to academic success. At the same time, it became clear that they were convinced that parents need to do more than just help their children learn and get the best grades at school. Motivational and socio-emotional support were equally important. Parents needed to support their children's academic development and well-being:

"Anne: That is goal number one—children's overall well-being. And when you realize, okay, you can also help in some small way where perhaps the teachers, the school, cannot reach my child, then it is quite clear and automatic that a mom or dad reacts. … Because when a parent has the chance, they always try to help." [41]

Referring to her daughter in grade seven, Anne also suggested that parental involvement in terms of motivational support would become even more important in higher grades. At several points in the interview, Anne showed a positive perception of how she routinely performed her role in accordance with internalized social expectations:

"Anne: My children often make lists for tests of what they have to do and what they have to learn. And … I am great at quizzing them [says satisfyingly]. When they prepare for class tests themselves, they create a learning sheet, and then I can check it again. That is our assistance at home in terms of tests." [42]

Like Anne, Mia expressed a high level of confidence and routine in supporting. This is an example of how she fulfilled the internalized role expectations, without doubting or feeling overwhelmed.

> "Mia: When we prepare for tests together, I feel safe that she [her child] has learned in the best way, and I also have a direct influence as a mother. Otherwise, I hand over the responsibility [to the teachers]. ... I don't want to say that I cannot give up the reins [laughs], but I trust myself the most." [43]

She also emphasized the importance of parental involvement in all dimensions of schooling and children's development, the cognitive, motivational and socioemotional:

> "Mia: I have noticed that if there are signs at school that her grades are going down or she is having less fun, I am there immediately and take over ... I look to see if there might be a trigger at home. I often look at how the teachers treat her to see if there might be something there, and sometimes that has actually been the reason: She felt that the teacher didn't like her, that she was stupid. ... Then I solve a lot of things for us or try to solve things with her by looking at things from a different angle and so on." [44]

In contrast, Cora did not give any examples demonstrating confidence in educational support at home. She also did not seem to have established a daily routine that would help her assist her son with his homework and learning for school. Instead, she expressed to feel very pressured by the demands of educational support and the high internalized expectations, as expressed in the following example:

> "Cora: I always study together with my son, so there should not be any false impressions. ... Of course, I sat down with him, but it [the homework task] was not clear to me either." [45]

In addition, there were other areas where she started to defend herself, felt the need to explain her actions and showed signs of being overwhelmed, such as using a computer which was suddenly required when distance learning began.

> "Cora: I do not have an office job, I do not really work with computers, and that is why I did not pass it [the computer skills] on to my child." [46]

Compared to Anne who had a second daughter in seventh grade, Cora had less experience as a mother in schooling. But when considering Mia, who only had one daughter in fifth grade, the logic that prior parental experience in schooling should be beneficial does not fit here. We can assume that it is other circumstances like being a single mother and lower educational and socioeconomic level that make Cora overwhelmed in her role. [47]

Below, I will give an overview of the categories "Me" and "I."

Category	Characteristics	Examples
"Me": Internalized social role expectations expressed by the mothers	Language: "You should," "parents should," "parents have to," etc. Level of conviction: Higher (Anne, Mia), lower (Cora)	"... *parents, they should definitely* be there for their child, in terms of homework support or supervision for class-tests preparation" (Anne). "... it is *definitely the parents' responsibility* to give their child the best possible support at home" (Mia). "*I think it is important* that parents look after it. ... *you should check regularly* and go through the tasks together with your child" (Cora).
"I": Spontaneous feelings and opinions according to the internalized role expectations expressed by the mothers	Language: "I" (first person pronoun) in the context of an individual situation of interaction with the child Level of perceived competence in schooling: Higher (Anne, Mia), lower (Cora)	"My children *often* make lists for tests, what they have to do and what they have to learn. And *I am great at quizzing them*" (Anne). "It *always seemed solvable to me,* as I have the knowledge" (Mia). "I agree with her [Anne], but it is not fair. Because *you cannot assume that all parents have the knowledge* to help their child. ... I see that problem now as a single parent" (Cora).

Table 1: Definitions, descriptions and examples of "Me" and "I" category [48]

6.3 Dealing with role conflicts and challenges in schooling

In the previous section, I explained internalized social role expectations expressed by the mothers ("Me") and spontaneous feelings and opinions the mothers expressed in the context of individual role perceptions ("I"). In the "I" category, I identified situated role conflicts of individual mothers when they did not meet the internalized role expectations and struggled with their role in schooling. In addition to the "I" category, the "Self" category was crucial to answer the second research question of how mothers deal with individual role conflicts in schooling. In this category, reflected individual role processes and characteristics of role identities in light of social expectations and perceived demands were included. As it was indicated, both Anne and Mia were capable in fulfilling social role expectations and they did not note highly stressful experiences and feelings of dissatisfaction. Cora, on the other hand, struggled the most with taking on her parental role in schooling and living up to expectations (see Table 2 for definition and examples of the category "Self").

Category	Characteristics	Examples
"Self": Reflection of one's role identity process expressed by mothers	Language: Generalizations in reference to your own personality like "I always..." Level of role satisfaction: Higher (Anne, Mia); lower (Cora)	"*I always want to know* where my kids are [in terms of the performance in school]—that is *my personal prerogative*, but that does not mean I have to do it" (Anne). "I am reflecting on myself right now. *I have assumed that* [parents must prepare their child for tests] because when I learn together with my child, I really know: 'Okay, she is ready for the test.' ... I don't even know why I handled it that way. *Maybe because I trust myself the most*?" (Mia) "*I always study with my son*, … [but] if I do not understand the exercise—how can I help my child?" (Cora)

Table 2: Category of "Self" [49]

Given that teachers as well as parents try to provide children with the best possible schooling, the role conflicts of the interviewed mothers became apparent not only when it came to the lack of parental knowledge and family resources but also in the context of mutual expectations in schooling. At crucial moments in their child's educational development, it became clear that the mothers would take on the main responsibility for academic performance, even before they approached teachers. According to Anne, this is the "easier way," as she expressed in the following:

> "Anne: I take over from the moment I realize that school is no longer sufficient for my child and their learning success. ... Of course, that is the easier way: When I immediately notice that my child has deficits or needs help, and I notice that I can offer and provide this support. It is the easier way to say, let's sit down and see what your problem is, how can I help you. Then contact the teacher: 'My child did not understand this and that,' 'my child needs this and that support.' In addition to my job and the children, I do not have the time to pester the teacher, talking about every detail." [50]

As a mother who worked full time, this is an example of Anne's developed routine of support at home through a quality and communicative parent-child relationship. Here, she expressed satisfaction with her role as well as the ability to balance work and family life. Elsewhere, Anne also highlighted that she did not perceive her role in schooling as a compulsory obligation in light of external expectations, as shown in the following:

"Anne: I always want to know where my kids are [in terms of the performance in school]—that is my personal prerogative, but that does not mean I *have* [emphasis Anne's] to do it. ... I am interested in what you have to do, what you have to learn, and I am happy to help them prepare for their test, which is a motivational aspect in parent-child communication. Saying it is none of my business, please do all this at school or at your desk, make the best of it yourself—then I would think that my children's progress would worsen." [51]

Although Anne did not struggle with individual role conflicts and expressed high satisfaction with fulfilling internalized role expectations, she took a critical stance towards the school's current role in distribution of tasks and shared responsibility in the family-school relationship. This was expressed in the following example, in which she explained her belief that parental interest in the curriculum and school subjects at home would increase the child's motivation to learn.

"Anne: I think motivational support should come from both sides—parents and teachers—but I think it should be more one of the school's tasks after all because, actually, I think the individual teachers would like the children to be successful. That is the primary goal. But success does not arise from pressure. In my opinion, success in the learning processes and schooling requires fun, and that is why I see the topic of motivation more relevant to school. I think motivation contributes to educational success." [52]

In this statement, Anne expressed dissatisfaction with the shared responsibility in schooling between parents and teachers. In her view, teachers should be more aware of motivating and learning for life without putting educational pressure on children.

"Anne: I was thinking in general terms about what a school is for: First and foremost, for teaching the subjects' content but also social learning, social development. For me, all of that is part of schooling. Getting to know the importance of human interaction to be prepared for social life—not only these subjects and specialized knowledge, ... also building a social identity, consideration for others etc. ... But it definitely gets short shrift! I agree with her [Cora] that schools have to take a more holistic view on learning: [They should foster children] becoming humans not only focused on themselves but also on society." [53]

This could be interpreted as a parental role conflict of another quality in comparison to Cora, who struggled with high demands in supporting her son's schooling, as Anne took on more responsibilities than the teachers. She was clear about where she saw the school's responsibility, but at the same time she made up for the school's shortcomings without discussing them with the teachers. [54]

Like Anne, Mia also did not see any advantage to contacting teachers. There was only one situation where she remembered that a teacher advised her to have her child tutored in mathematics if they, as parents, could not support the child themselves. "That was early feedback," Mia said, but she probably would not

have arranged a counseling appointment on her own, as expressed in the following example:

> "Mia: Apart from that [learning difficulties in mathematics] there was nothing else that I felt I needed to contact teachers about. Although, [thoughtfully] yes, maybe I can expand it [individual teacher contacts about schooling] anyway? Yes [shrugs]." [55]

At the same time, in this example, Mia's deep self-reflection in the course of the interview discussion was expressed as she reflected on individual parent-teacher communication. Elsewhere in Mia's case, it became clear that distance in contact and maybe unspoken role conflicts in the relationship between parents and teachers could lead to a lack of trust. This distance and low trust appeared in the following example:

> "Mia: I am reflecting on myself right now. I have assumed that for myself because when I learn together with my child, I really know: 'Okay, she is ready for the test.' When I hand it over, it is in the dark; then we need the grade on how well she has learned the things; and then I would need feedback from the teachers. ... I don't even know why I handled it that way. Maybe because I trust myself the most?" [56]

Regarding the school's responsibility in motivational support, Mia also expressed dissatisfaction with the shared responsibility between parents and teachers. She explained:

> "Mia: You motivate the child: 'School, great and super,' and then, somehow there are only boring lessons at school and the motivation is gone. Then, all you have to do at home is deal with the damage. So, it is definitely part of the school's job to maintain motivation, for example by doing exciting lessons so that the children are not demotivated." [57]

Both Anne and Mia agreed that the teachers should be more sensitive to their responsibility for students' enjoyment of learning and individual socioemotional development. Given the shared responsibility of parents and teachers at school, one can assume that this dissatisfaction with the role of the teacher could lead to role conflicts for the mothers if the distance in the family-school relationship or a lack of trust becomes stronger. The importance of teachers' responsiveness and parents' expectations of a good relationship at school was demonstrated by Anne:

> "Anne: In times of distance learning, I have more often phoned individual teachers because I *wanted* [emphasis Anne's] to get feedback myself on how my children were doing during the COVID-19 crisis, on what went well and what went badly." [58]

In this example, Anne perceived the advantage of receiving individual feedback on learning processes from teachers during times of uncertainty. Although she showed a strong routine and confidence in her role that had proven effective in the past when her children's performance deteriorated, at the same time, she perceived educational pressure from *Gymnasium*. She was aware of the pressure on her children which also affected her caring for them.

> "Anne: The joy of learning and not being under pressure to do everything perfectly in the short time the children have. It would be great if it [the school system] developed in that way." [59]

I assume that under certain conditions during the COVID-19 crisis, she appreciated the contact with teachers to make sure that her children's educational development did not fall behind. Cora also reported direct communication as an effective strategy when struggling with learning support. She particularly noted the helpfulness of being able to contact the teacher via e-mail since COVID-19.

> "Cora: My son had problems in online lessons, and then I twice wrote the teachers an e-mail.
>
> Moderator: And before or after COVID-19 and distance learning, do you think that you had asked for an explanation of learning tasks?
>
> Cora: No. No, no, we did not have any e-mail contact with the teachers before. I would have said to my son, ask the teacher when you have lessons again. And he certainly would not have asked again because he would not have dared [sadly speaking]. I have not had any e-mail addresses before. That is only since COVID-19. This has been a great benefit." [60]

In this case, Cora perceived teacher contact as a resource for dealing with her lack of knowledge and her role conflict because she wanted to, but was unable to support her son. As I indicated in the previous section, she agreed with Anne and Mia and had internalized the same social role expectations and impressions of ideal role behavior. However, in the context of social and educational inequalities in which Cora saw herself and her son as disadvantaged, she emphasized that commonly internalized parental role expectations were unfair.

> "Cora: The education [educational background of parents] can be decisive for some parents when it comes to the question, do I send my child to Gymnasium? ... Maybe a child attend Gymnasium because the parents think: 'If that's my responsibility—I cannot support you, you cannot take the higher school track.' ... It is very difficult because it actually means this supposed equal opportunity does not exist. And that is why I think *it can be a task of parents* [to give support in learning], *but it shouldn't* [emphasis Cora's] be. [61]

In this example, a potential and fundamental role conflict for parents with a lower level of education was expressed. Cora was critical of the effects of one's educational background and the segregated school system in Germany. This means that the structures of the school system and particular family situations can lead to parental dissatisfaction and intense pressure as a result of the perception that a child is not receiving the same educational support as other children and that the parents themselves cannot meet their internalized expectations. In Cora's case, her role conflict of not being able to fulfill internalized social expectations was expressed throughout the interview. At the end, she said the following:

> "Cora: What I wanted to say: I always study with my son, *not that you get the wrong impression* [emphasis Cora's]. We have always studied together. That was just an example when we really didn't get any further. And then I have to ask the teacher. If I do not understand the exercise—how should I help my child? *Of course*, I sat together with him trying to help, but it was not clear to me either." [62]

Here, Cora seemed to feel she had to justify herself that she could not fulfill her role without the help of the teacher. Nevertheless, her strategy of contacting the teachers proved to be beneficial for both her son and herself in coping with her role strain. In this case, parent-teacher contact became a social resource that Cora lacked. She had neither a partner who could be supportive in schooling nor could she pay for tutoring. Overall, I assume that individual open parent-teacher communication is supportive in developing an effective and trustful cooperation and fostering parental role processes in schooling. By clarifying responsibilities, talking about family routines, sharing experiences in schooling, etc., misunderstandings, prejudices and role conflicts can be avoided. This was also the case for Anne and Mia who expressed their dissatisfaction with teachers not taking on the responsibility of motivating children under the pressure of school demands or after boring lessons, and providing emotional support when their daughters were shy or anxious in various situations at school. [63]

7. Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Summary

In the present paper, I used partial data from a focus group study analyzed with grounded theory methodology to understand the parental role in schooling from the mothers' perspective. I deliberately chose a small group of three mothers from contrasting backgrounds to analyze expressed social expectations and their individual role perceptions as educators of fifth graders. There were two key research questions: 1. How do mothers explain internalized social role expectations in schooling and 2. How do mothers deal with individual role conflicts in schooling? Overall, in the interview, the three mothers discussed the high role expectations internalized at the beginning of secondary school that they tried to fulfill. They expressed agreement that contemporary expectations of intensive parental engagement are essential to children's academic and socioemotional development (e.g., SULLIVAN, 2021). As Anne expressed, this engagement in schooling might stem from the natural tendencies in the parental role. At the same time, I gained concrete impressions of individual mothers' role conflicts and how they dealt with them. From a number of statements, it was clear that their involvement in schooling is driven by social and teacher expectations as well as internalized ideals that place high demands and pressures on them (GARTMEIER, 2018; SCHNEIDER et al., 2015; WALPER & KREYENFELD, 2022). The interviewed mothers expressed that they take care of children's educational needs in various ways including homework support, preparation for class tests and socioemotional and motivational support (e.g., KILLUS & PASEKA, 2016; LUPLOW & SMIDT, 2019), even if they felt a lack of knowledge, as seen in Cora's case, or thought that it was the teachers' responsibility. This

was also clearly expressed by Anne and Mia when talking about motivating children to learn. However, rather than an individual source of stress, this seemed to be a role conflict in the educational relationship and division of responsibilities with the teachers. [64]

Consistent with previous research (e.g., MARCUS et al., 2021; VODAFONE STIFTUNG DEUTSCHLAND, 2015), both mothers with higher educational backgrounds (Anne and Mia) reported effective learning strategies and routines at home. They did not express the strain that Cora did, who struggled with her own lack of knowledge as she tried to help her fifth-grade son with his homework. She also mentioned that, as a single parent and with a second child of two years of age, it is particularly difficult to provide the necessary support at home for her child's schooling. In addition, in her case, there seemed to be a lack of financial resources to organize paid private tutoring, as the other two mothers would do when there was no one at home to help, for example in math, as Mia explained. Living in a traditional partnership, both Anne and Mia would ask their partner for homework support in specific subjects if they lacked competence. [65]

With the mother taking the primary caregiving and schooling role, Mia's case seemed more gendered than Anne's, who shared responsibility for the two daughters with her husband while both worked full-time. Nevertheless, neither mother expressed being stressed or overwhelmed in education. They expressed a high level of self-confidence in their parenting and schooling skills, which led to a satisfied maternal role identity. Furthermore, they tend to support their children's school achievement independently of the teachers, without seeking teacher contact. For a full-time working mother like Anne, this is the most effective way of schooling; she has integrated well-established learning strategies and routines in everyday family life and parent-child communication (e.g., at family dinner). Perhaps her experience with school is an advantage because, unlike the other two mothers, she has an older daughter in seventh grade. Even though individual mother-teacher communication was stated as a social resource by Cora in the case of homework help, and Anne also emphasized the need of contact in times of distance learning, it seems to be a deviation from the norm, showing a lack of competence. [66]

Whether individual parent-teacher communication can actually reduce individual stress is an open question that could be part of a quantitative study. However, given the perceived pressures of time, financial and educational investment, it can be assumed that a clear understanding of parents' and teachers' roles in schooling and shared perceptions are essential to prevent fundamental role conflicts. It has also become clear that even if the influence of parents decreases in adolescence, they take on a central role in secondary school (ULRICH & HACHFELD, 2024). In addition, low-threshold contact with teachers is helpful in individual cases; e.g., when it comes to being overwhelmed with homework or when the child and parent do not understand the exercise. As Cora said, during COVID-19 and online lessons, she obtained the teachers' e-mail addresses, which was very helpful and offered security for future situations where she has questions with homework. This is in contrast to before the pandemic, when she

was unable to help in such situations. If her son was struggling with tasks, she would have told him to ask the teachers directly rather than contacting them herself as a mother. Although the importance of "educational partnerships" between parents and schools has been emphasized (e.g., EPSTEIN et al., 2002; KMK, 2018; SACHER, 2022), and has also been shown to benefit children's achievement (e.g., DETTMERS et al., 2019; WILDER, 2014), this vision and the role of teachers as a resource of parents needs to be implemented more. This could foster families' well-being and children's development. [67]

Given the contrasting characteristics of individual mothers like role beliefs (e.g., being a partner in learning at home or checking a child's tasks and homework) and family routines (e.g., eating together, sharing the parental role in schooling with the partner), they differ in the extent and form of participation in schooling and supporting at home. In line with previous research (DESFORGES & ABOUCHAAR, 2003), this emphasizes that parents are a heterogeneous group. Considering social inequalities (e.g., education, financial resources) and family status such as single motherhood, Cora struggled most with perceived role expectations, demands on herself and role conflicts in schooling. She did not feel less responsible or less engaged, but she did note that she faced various challenges and stressors, suggesting an unsatisfactory perceived role in schooling. However, although Cora emphasized the possibility of e-mail or phone contact and particular moments of contact with teachers were helpful in specific situations of being overwhelmed, she seemed uncomfortable admitting her lower competence and lack of knowledge in schooling. The question therefore arises as to how teachers can sensitively and effectively establish contact with parents. [68]

Using methodological triangulation, I identified other issues that were crucial to studying and understanding mothers' social role expectations, their individual perceptions and conflicts in schooling. These include teachers' prompts (e.g., allocation of responsibility for individual support and investment in tutoring) and previous parental experiences with schools and teachers (e.g., relationship of trust or distance). Due to mothers' reflections on their roles, it became clear that their expectations and educational involvement were increased when schools neglected their part of the responsibility in supporting children's academic achievement and well-being. Mothers then try to compensate for the school's shortcomings and act according to their child's individual needs. With this and social and educational pressures in mind, we should be cautious about whether forms and qualities of "intensive parenting" are natural consequences or an overreaction in contemporary societies (GARTMEIER, 2018; SCHULZ & STEINBACH, 2023). It should be noted that mothers' dissatisfaction with schools fulfilling their responsibilities, especially teaching quality and motivating children, can lead to a role conflict with the parental reaction of taking over more educational tasks at home. According to the interviewed mothers, parents need to reduce their child's unhappiness and invest in individual learning support. In line with quantitative research (WALPER & KREYENFELD, 2022), it was notable that all mothers, regardless of the individual and family resources available to them, described feelings of pressure from the educational system and the need for time management and financial investment like digital equipment. Given that the

educational pressure affects parents and children and that motivation is a prerequisite for learning, mothers seemed increasingly concerned about their children's well-being and motivational support in schooling. Parents' role understanding and behavior should therefore be understood as a proactive and reactive process in light of perceived child's needs, social pressures, demands, and individual resources. [69]

7.2 Limitations and future recommendations

In the present study, a limitation is that the experiences of the three mothers can certainly not be generalized. Of course, this could not be the claim of in-depth qualitative analyses (e.g., SCHREIER, 2011). The findings of the qualitative study provide important insights into social role perceived and reflected by mothers in fifth grade and how they deal with role conflicts. Reflecting on the sample and the recruitment, the primary criterion was the identification of the participants with the maternal role in addition to the presence of a school-age child in their household. It was not decisive whether the motherhood was biological or social and in which couple (hetero- or homosexual) set-up the participants lived. Nevertheless, I received information if participants lived separately from the other parent of the child. As I have criticized in the introduction, the underrepresentation of people who deviate from the norm of heterosexual families in empirical studies is a reason to rethink research. It is imperative that the discourse on gender and family diversity is included in research samples and, above all, more clearly represented. This also applies to the role of the father, which I neglected in my study. [70]

From a methodological point of view, the deductive approach runs the risk of imposing theory-based concepts on the data and then overlooking new specific aspects of the interviewees' statements, especially in the case of under-researched phenomena. Using a methodological triangulation with inductive grounded theory analyses (Step 1) and deductive approach (Step 2), the concepts of symbolic interactionism theory proved to be an effective strategy. The findings indicate that this two-step approach in open qualitative analyses proved to be useful in empirically addressing the question of how parental role processes and perceptions are related with one another and other concepts, like teachers or mothers in general. Grounded theory methodology provides a deep exploration of the open-guided interview discussion. Regarding the theory of symbolic interactionism, I found significant potential to examine internalized role expectations, individual perceptions and parent conflicts, especially mothers, in schooling. The theory-based idea is that individuals can develop their role identity and role distance by acting in social situations and communicating with others over life-long socialization, which includes processes of family-school cooperation. [71]

Considering ongoing research initiatives in social and educational sciences, it is imperative to ascertain more about parental role conflicts as educators in the school context. It is crucial to identify effective strategies of individual parents and various family routines in learning and schooling in order to comprehend how to

support those who struggle most with social and educational expectations. The present paper provides valuable information for further research on parental role processes, individual perceptions and conflicts and behavior in family-school relationships in practice. [72]

First, in light of family diversity and social demands, parental role conflicts and individual self-perceptions in schooling are understudied aspects of empirical educational research. Second, teachers need to be aware of their role as a point of contact for parents seeking help with schooling. Enhancing the quality of individual parent-teacher communication and effective support at home can be facilitated by a deeper understanding of parents' perceptions. This is of paramount importance to avoid any potential adverse impacts on the children of parents who may lack knowledge, experience self-doubt or feel dissatisfied with their role in schooling. In order to ensure that the increasing pressure on parents does not disrupt children's learning processes at home, it is essential to facilitate an open discourse between researchers, educators, parents and others such as politicians about social expectations and the potential or purpose of effective family-school cooperation. By doing so, a shared vision of parental role based on a shared vision of education goals can emerge. Finally, the methodological triangulation of open qualitative analysis with grounded theory and a deductive process using three main concepts ("Me," "I" and "Self") of symbolic interactionism theory can provide new subject-oriented and theory-based insights into how parents, teachers and pupils perceive and reflect on their own role in individual family-school relationships with regard to social expectations and educational pressure. This innovative approach can also be applied to other studies which examine social roles and individual identity development. [73]

Acknowledgments

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