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# One for All or All for One? Do Principal's and Teacher's Goal Orientations Affect Students' Achievement in Reading, Spelling and Vocabulary?

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## Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate whether the motivation of principals and teachers plays a significant role on the achievement of elementary school students. Participants were 193 elementary school students who attended grades 3 through 6 of 2 schools in a large metropolitan area of Greece. Students' achievement in language was estimated using normative scales. Teachers' motivation was assessed using Elliot's achievement goal measure. Data were analyzed using mixed modeling due to the hierarchical structure of the data. Results indicated that there were no differences between principal and teacher's adoption of goals. Further analyses focused on teachers and indicated that their adoption of mastery goals (approach or avoidance) were positive predictors of students' achievement in reading comprehension. Performance approach goals were negative predictors of both reading comprehension and spelling. Last, performance avoidance goals were positive predictors of vocabulary. It is concluded that teachers motivational dispositions play a significant role in the achievement levels of their students.

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*Keywords:* Goal orientations, Teacher motivation, Principal motivation, school culture;

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## 1. Introduction

Personal achievement goals have received increased attention in educational psychology following the pioneer work of Dweck, Ames, Nicholls, Elliot, Harackiewicz, Midgley, and others. The theory originally posited that valuing intrinsic versus extrinsic reasons for engaging with academic tasks provides an explanatory framework for school achievement, engaging behaviors and self-regulation. Initially, theorists postulated that individuals engage with an academic task either for intrinsic reasons (i.e., the inclination to master a skill out of interest and the joy that involvement brings) or the desire to outperform others and excel using normative evaluative criteria on what success

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is. Broadly speaking, the former goals were termed mastery or learning and the latter performance goals. The original dichotomy was further bifurcated using the approach-avoidance distinction (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). That is, individuals could adopt a mastery goal out of interest and the desire to master a skill (mastery approach) or avoid not mastering the skill (mastery avoidance) (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Similarly engagement with a focus on performance outcomes could either approach success (i.e., target at outperforming everybody else - performance approach) or target at avoiding failure (Elliot (1999). The model has been recently extended to adopt a normative versus non-normative distinction (Grant & Dweck, 2003) with mixed findings emerging from exploratory factor analysis procedures. Thus, for the conceptual and content validity of further bifurcations in achievement goals the jury is still out.

Since the mid-eighties a huge amount of research has been accumulated with regard to the function and regulation from adopting various goals. For example, mastery goals have oftentimes been related positively with intrinsic motivation, and skill mastery, but not directly with achievement (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). Performance avoidance goals have been responsible for anxiety, stress, and feelings of apprehension, along with poor achievement outcomes (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). For performance approach goals mixed findings have been produced. For example, Harackiewicz et al., (2002) suggested that the accumulated evidence points to clear positive links between these goals and academic achievement outcomes (direct effects). Others have reported both emotional decrements and poor performance outcomes from adopting these goals. With regard to mastery avoidance goals research has been scarce.

Teachers and principals play a crucial role for the appropriate environment cultivation in school settings and promote its effectiveness through specific initiatives. This is particularly more important since empirical evidence suggests that contextual goals shape students' personal goals (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006; Wolters, 2004). In the literature, researchers use the term "*Responsive Leadership Interventions*" describing leadership strategies employed "*to influence the successful implementation of school-based or system-wide initiatives that lead to improved instruction by teachers and increased learning outcomes for students*" (Boscardin, 2007, p. 191). Two of the most successful leadership practices according to Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) are (a) *setting directions* by developing a shared vision and goals, target at motivating and helping people in the organization, monitoring organizational performance, communicating effectively; and (b) *developing people* by supporting individual needs target at promoting best practices through examples, offering intellectual stimulation to teachers in order to improve their work.

What is yet to be addressed is how teacher's and principals' personal goals affect the achievement of their students through creating specific 'motivational cultures' in the environments they control (classroom for teachers, school for principals). That is, teachers and principals cultivate a culture that is based on their personal beliefs and evaluations on what performance is, how it is valued and the consequences associated with positive and negative achievement outcomes. Unraveling those relationships at the school and classroom levels are the objectives of the present study.

### *1.1. Purpose of Study*

The purpose of the present study was to test the hypothesis that principal's and teacher's motivation produces consistent effects on the achievement of their students. Specifically, it was hypothesized that approach goals, mastery and performance would exert positive effects on students' achievement and the opposite would be true of avoidance goals (i.e., mastery avoidance and performance avoidance). Of particular interest was the relationship between principal's and teacher's motivation at a given school. That is, is there concordance between the motivation of principals and teachers who are at the same school?

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Participants and Procedures*

Participants were 193 elementary school students who were recruited from 4 schools of a large metropolitan area of Greece. There were 51 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, 46 4<sup>th</sup> graders, 51 5<sup>th</sup> graders and 45 6<sup>th</sup> graders. There were 85 boys and 98 girls (data on gender were missing from 3 students). Students were assessed on their language performance at the

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