



## Student–teacher relationships and achievement goal orientations: Examining student perceptions in an ethnically diverse sample



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### ABSTRACT

Among an ethnically diverse sample of 803 preadolescent students (ages 9–13 years), the present study examined the associations between students' perceptions of the student–teacher relationship and their achievement goal orientations. Multilevel analyses showed that students who perceived more closeness in the relationship with their teacher reported a stronger endorsement of mastery goals, particularly when they experienced more emotional problems.

This finding was independent of students' perceptions of peer acceptance. Likewise, perceived relational negativity (conflict and dependency) was associated with a stronger endorsement of performance goals (approach and avoidance). The results were similar for ethnic minority and ethnic majority students, and consistent with an attachment perspective which explains the motivational impact of the student–teacher relationship in terms of the security it provides.

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Numerous studies in educational and developmental psychology have concluded that students' affective relationships with their teachers are crucial for their academic motivation and school engagement (see for reviews, Davis (2003); Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, and Oort (2011)). These studies have relied on insights and concepts from various theoretical viewpoints, but few of them have used the achievement goal approach to examine the motivational impact of the student–teacher bond. The achievement goal approach is one of the prominent and leading frameworks in motivational psychology and claims that students' motivation and behaviors in achievement situations should be understood by examining their endorsement of qualitatively different achievement goals (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Elliot, 1999; Nicholls, 1984; Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). There is ample evidence that teachers can affect this endorsement, but most of the research focuses on teachers' instructional practices and the creation of classroom goal structures rather than the affective relations between students and teachers (e.g., Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006; Michou, Mouratidis, Lens, & Vansteenkiste, 2013; Schwinger & Stiensmeier-Pelster, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

In the present study we examined how preadolescents' (ages 9–13 years) perceptions of the personal relationships with their teachers are related to their endorsements of different achievement goals. We aim to make a unique contribution to the literature by combining the achievement goal approach with an attachment perspective on the student–teacher relationship. We studied a large sample of students from various grade 4–6 classrooms in the Netherlands. In the Dutch school system, these students typically have the same single teacher all day long and the whole year round, which means that teachers are significant adults in their daily lives. Moreover, our sample consisted of different ethnic groups. In many (Western) countries student populations are increasingly ethnically diverse, and it is important that this diversity is represented in research.

### 1. An attachment perspective on motivation

The last two decades have seen a resurgence of research interest in the student–teacher relationship and much of this work has been conducted from an attachment perspective (see Davis (2003); Roorda et al. (2011)). This attachment perspective differs from other theoretical perspectives on the motivational impact of teachers – such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) or the Self-System Model of Motivation (Connell & Wellborn, 1991) – because it focuses on the mutual relationship between student and teacher, and because it explains the motivational impact of this relationship in terms of emotional security (Roorda et al., 2011) rather than the socialization of the motivation to learn (Davis, 2003). In addition, the attachment perspective

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<sup>1</sup> Later formulations of the achievement goal approach have distinguished between mastery-approach and mastery-avoidance goals as well, making a full crossing between mastery-performance and approach-avoidance (e.g., Elliot, 1999). However, the mastery-avoidance construct may be more realistic for older people versus preadolescent children (see Elliot and Thrash (2001); Jansen in de Wal (2010)).

makes the distinction between different aspects of the quality of the student–teacher relationship.

According to attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1982) the quality of children's relationships with their primary caregivers (their attachment bonds) is crucial for the ways they deal with stress and challenges. Securely attached children can use these relationships as a 'safe haven' to return to in times of need or stress but also as a 'secure base'. The latter means that they feel confident enough to explore their surroundings because they know that their attachment figure is there to help and protect them if necessary. Children's relationships with their teachers are typically of limited duration and not as exclusive as their bonds with their primary caregivers. Still, teachers can function as secondary or surrogate attachment figures for children (Ainsworth, 1989) as they can emotionally support and comfort them in times of stress (Pianta, 1992; van Ijzendoorn, Sagi, & Lambermon, 1992), and provide them with the security necessary for independent task behaviors (Thijs & Koomen, 2008). These attachment functions are particularly evident in early childhood but emotional security with teachers continues to be important throughout the school years (Baker, 2006; Little & Kobak, 2003).

Following the work of Pianta (1994, 2001), studies working from the attachment perspective have examined the quality of the student–teacher relationship along the dimensions of closeness, conflict, and dependency. Most of this research has relied on teachers' relationship perceptions, but there is evidence that at least two of these dimensions (conflict and closeness) can be reliably assessed in children as well (Spilt, Koomen, & Mantzicopoulos, 2010; Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010). Closeness refers to the experience of mutual warmth and open communication in the relationship, and the student's confidence that she or he can effectively use the teacher as a source of emotional support. By contrast, conflict and dependency are negative indicators of relationship quality. They involve, respectively, the experience of mutually negative feelings and strenuous interactions, and the degree to which the student is overly concerned with the teacher's availability and in constant need of her or his reassurance. Whereas closeness is a sign that the student feels secure in the relationship, dependency and conflict, can be seen to indicate a lack of security in the student–teacher relationship (Pianta, 1994; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). According to the attachment perspective, this relational security, or lack thereof, is crucial for understanding how the student–teacher relationship can affect the student's motivation. Whereas positive and secure relationships are assumed to promote students' natural inclinations to explore their learning environment and to be actively involved in it, negative and insecure relationships are assumed to undermine such tendencies (Pianta et al., 2003). There is good empirical support for these assumptions (see Roorda et al. (2011)) yet to date we know remarkably little about how students' security or insecurity with their teachers affects their endorsement of different achievement goals.

## 2. Achievement goals, attachment, and the student–teacher relationship

The achievement goal approach includes several conceptually similar frameworks which state that individuals can have qualitatively different goals in achievement situations (see for reviews, Eccles and Wigfield (2002); Elliot (1999); Wigfield and Cambria (2010)). Whereas some authors have examined these goals as situation-specific motivational states, most studies including the present research focus on people's general tendencies to endorse particular goals, i.e., their goal orientations (see Avery and Smillie (2013)). Traditionally, the distinction is made between mastery (or learning, or task) goals and performance (or ego, or self-validation) goals, and these goals are assumed to be the result of different underlying beliefs about the nature of competence. When people endorse mastery goals they seek to increase their skills and mastery in a particular task situation and the underlying belief is that their competence is malleable and can be developed. That is to

say, they have an incremental view of their ability. By contrast, performance goals are based on the belief that one's competence is fixed and reflected by one's achievement, which is also known as an entity view. Accordingly, individuals with performance goals are motivated to demonstrate their competence relative to others. Later, researchers have created a trichonomous framework by making the distinction between performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals. Whereas the former involve the tendency to prove that one is more competent than others, the latter involve the tendency to prove that one is not less competent than others (Elliot, 1999).<sup>1</sup> Several studies have examined the effects of these three different goals on various outcome measures – including challenge related affect, engagement, persistence, intrinsic motivation, and the processing and retention of information. Together they have shown that mastery goals and, to a slightly lesser extent, performance-approach goals are adaptive, but that performance-avoidance goals undermine students' academic adjustment (Dinger, Dickhäuser, Spinath, & Steinmayr, 2013; Elliot, 1999; Wigfield & Cambria, 2010).

Although there has been research on the link between students' perceptions of classroom goal structures and teacher support (Turner, Gray, Anderman, Dawson, & Anderman, 2013), educational psychologists have neglected the link between the dyadic, interpersonal student–teacher relationship and students' achievement goal orientations. To our knowledge there are three exceptions. Patrick, Ryan, and Kaplan (2007) studied a large sample of 5th grade students. They found that teachers had a unique influence on students' endorsement of mastery through their emotional support. Two other studies took a self-determination approach and examined secondary school students' perceptions of basic need support from their teachers. They found that these perceptions were positively related to students' mastery goals but also to their performance goals (Diseth, Danielsen, & Samdal, 2012; Diseth & Samdal, 2014). The present research goes beyond these previous studies by adopting an attachment approach and examining how students' achievement goal orientations are related to both positive and negative aspects of the student–teacher relationship.

Although interpersonal relationships are not central to it, different authors have tried to link the achievement goal approach to attachment theory (Elliot & Reis, 2003; Rusk & Rothbaum, 2010). The achievement goal approach claims that people's achievement goals or goal orientations are based on their beliefs about the nature of competence (incremental or entity). However, from an attachment perspective it can be argued that perceptions of (in)security are an additional source of influence (Rusk & Rothbaum, 2010). According to attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1982), the experience of attachment security allows children (and later adults) to follow their natural inclination to explore their environment and to effectively interact with it in a care-free manner (Cassidy, 1999). In achievement situations, this exploration tendency can be expected to manifest itself in approach tendencies and especially in the pursuit of mastery (Elliot & Reis, 2003; Rusk & Rothbaum, 2010). By contrast, individuals in insecure attachment relations may worry about the availability of the attachment figure. In that case, "the lack of a secure base is presumed to interfere with approach-based tendencies by making attachment concerns salient and by reorienting the individual toward the avoidance of failure", and the adoption of performance-avoidance should be more likely (Elliot & Reis, 2003, p. 319). Elliot and Reis (2003) examined these hypotheses in a study undergraduate students in romantic attachment relationships. As expected, they found that secure attachment was positively related to the adoption of mastery goals, whereas this relation was negative for avoidant attachment, and that anxious/ambivalent attachment was positively associated with the adoption of performance-avoidance goals. These results were consistent with previous research among a fairly younger sample: Moss and St-Laurent (2001) showed that 6-year-old children's attachment security to their mothers was related to their mastery motivation two years later. Unfortunately, performance goals were not included in that study.

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