



Achievement goal orientations and academic well-being across the transition to upper secondary education

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine students' ($N = 579$) achievement goal orientation profiles, the temporal stability of these profiles across the transition to upper secondary education, and profile differences in academic well-being (i.e., school value, school burnout, schoolwork engagement, satisfaction with educational choice). By means of latent profile analysis, four groups of students with distinct motivational profiles were identified: indifferent, success-oriented, mastery-oriented, and avoidance-oriented. Motivational profiles were relatively stable across the transition; half of the students displayed identical profiles over time and most of the changes in the group memberships were directed towards neighboring groups. Regarding group differences, indifferent and avoidance-oriented students showed less adaptive patterns of motivation and academic well-being than did mastery- and success-oriented students. Both mastery- and success-oriented students were highly engaged in studying and found their schoolwork meaningful, although success-oriented students' stronger concerns with performance seemed to make them more vulnerable to school burnout.

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1. Introduction

Educational transitions can be a risk factor for students' academic motivation and well-being. They have been often associated with negative outcomes such as decreased academic value and interest, decreased mastery goals, increased stress, and lower academic achievement (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Roeser, Eccles, & Freedman-Doan, 1999; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001; Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006). The fit between the person (student) and the environment (school) is a crucial factor affecting student's school adjustment and well-being during an educational transition. As parallel changes are occurring in both the individual and the context (see Eccles & Roeser, 2009), the stage-environment fit (Eccles & Midgley, 1989) is unbalanced and repeatedly reassessed. However, only some of the students seem to encounter adjustment problems and declining motivation, while others go through this phase without these problems (Ratelle, Guay, Larose, & Senécal, 2004; Roeser et al., 1999). Students' well-being is associated with the goals they pursue in achievement

situations, that is, goals related to self-improvement and growth are associated with better socio-emotional functioning and more positive self-evaluations, whereas goals related to validating and demonstrating competence are more linked with adjustment problems and socio-emotional vulnerability (e.g., Daniels et al., 2008; Dykman, 1998; Kaplan & Maehr, 1999; Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro, & Niemivirta, 2008). Grounding on these findings, we sought to expand prior research by examining the longitudinal stability and changes in secondary school students' achievement goal orientations and academic well-being during an educational transition. Using a longitudinal person-centered approach, we examined whether students' motivational profiles and possible change in those profiles moderated the influence of educational transition on students' academic well-being.

1.1. Achievement goal orientations

A prominent area in the study of student motivation over the past several decades has been achievement goal research (see Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Urdan, 1997). Originally, the central distinction drawn by achievement goal theorists was between mastery and performance goals (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1989), but later research has expanded this dichotomous scheme by describing other goals related to achievement behavior. A mastery goal refers to a striving to learn, understand, and improve skills based on an intrapersonal evaluative standard, while a performance goal is seen as a striving to outperform others and appear competent based on an interpersonal standard. Nicholls and his colleagues (Nicholls, Patashnick, & Nolen, 1985; Nolen, 1988) identified

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another class of goal, namely work-avoidant goals, which refer to avoiding challenging tasks, putting forth as little effort as possible and trying to get away with it.

Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) argued that the nature and function of performance goals would be more accurately understood if they were further differentiated into separate approach and avoidance components. Accordingly, performance-approach goals are directed at demonstrating competence, while performance-avoidance goals are directed at avoiding the demonstration of incompetence (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; see also Murayama, Elliot, & Yamagata, 2011; Skaalvik, 1997). Unlike work avoidance goals, which refer to the aim of avoiding school-related work altogether, performance-avoidance goals reflect the aim of avoiding signs of incompetence.

Recently, it has been suggested that also mastery goals could be separated into approach and avoidance forms—avoidance mastery orientation referring to avoiding misunderstanding and not mastering the task (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pintrich, 2000; see also Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011). Other mastery-related nuances include mastery-extrinsic goals (Niemivirta, 2002b) and outcome goals (Grant & Dweck, 2003). The mastery-extrinsic goals refer to the tendency of relying on external criteria such as grades or explicit feedback when evaluating whether one has attained the given goal of mastering a subject or learning a new thing (Niemivirta, 2002b). Students holding this tendency seek to master school subjects and they focus on absolute success (i.e., getting good grades) instead of relative success (i.e., outperforming others), not necessarily due to its instrumental value, but rather due to the fact that from their viewpoint good grades imply mastery and learning. In other words, mastery-extrinsic orientation emphasizes achievement but not competition (see also Brophy, 2005).

Despite the general consensus, some notable differences exist in how achievement goals have been conceptualized and operationalized. Basically, research seems to follow two approaches: one that looks at the dispositions (i.e., achievement goal orientations) that are likely to predict goal choices, and the other that places more emphasis on the situation- and task-specific nature of particular goals (see Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Urdan, 1997). The present study builds on the former, a conception already put forward by Nicholls (1989) and Dweck (1986), and defines achievement goal orientation as a disposition that reflects students' generalized tendencies to select certain goals and favor certain outcomes in an achievement context (Niemivirta, 2002b; see also Tuominen-Soini et al., 2008, Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro, & Niemivirta, 2011).

The multiple goals perspective (Pintrich, 2000; see also Niemivirta, 2002b; Seifert, 1996; Tuominen-Soini et al., 2008, 2011) states that students can and do pursue multiple goals simultaneously in school settings. Echoing this perspective, we deem that individuals' goal preferences can be described in terms of several dimensions that all students share (i.e., all different classes of goals or types of orientations), but which vary in terms of individual importance or weight. Thus, the relative emphasis on one or more of them becomes more relevant than an individual dimension (cf., Dweck, 1996). Although some debate exists regarding which combination of goals or goal orientations leads to the most adaptive outcomes, it is generally accepted that students oriented towards learning and understanding (e.g., learning-oriented students, Niemivirta, 2002b; Tapola & Niemivirta, 2008; Turner, Thorpe, & Meyer, 1998; mastery-oriented students, Roeser, Strobel, & Quihuis, 2002; Seifert, 1996) show a more adaptive pattern of motivation and achievement than those weakly oriented towards mastery. With respect to the simultaneous emphasis on both mastery and performance tendencies (e.g., multiple goals cluster, Daniels et al., 2008; success-oriented students, Tuominen-Soini et al., 2008, 2011; Turner et al., 1998; approach group, Luo, Paris, Hogan, & Luo, 2011), the findings are twofold. Some studies show that students inclined towards both mastery and performance use more cognitive strategies and obtain better academic performance

than high-mastery/low-performance students (Bouffard, Boisvert, Vezeau, & Larouche, 1995; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002; Pintrich, 2000), while some other studies demonstrate that students endorsing dominantly mastery goals display the most adaptive pattern of motivation and achievement (Meece & Holt, 1993; Roeser et al., 2002; Turner et al., 1998). The latter findings suggest that strivings towards performance and success might, even in the presence of mastery strivings, entail some unfavorable outcomes, such as anxiety and vulnerability to emotional distress (Daniels et al., 2008; Tuominen-Soini et al., 2008). Research also shows that students who are only slightly preoccupied with both mastery and performance (e.g., low-mastery/low-performance group, Bouffard et al., 1995; Pintrich, 2000; low-motivation cluster, Daniels et al., 2008; indifferent students, Tuominen-Soini et al., 2008, 2011; uncommitted students, Turner et al., 1998) or who emphasize mainly avoidance tendencies (e.g., avoidance-oriented students, Tapola & Niemivirta, 2008; Tuominen-Soini et al., 2011; Turner et al., 1998) have the least adaptive profile in terms of motivation and learning.

1.2. The development of achievement goal orientations

Relatively few empirical studies have explicitly investigated the longitudinal stability of either goals or goal orientations (see, however, Fryer & Elliot, 2007; Muis & Edwards, 2009; Tuominen-Soini et al., 2011). Further, even fewer studies have examined the development of achievement goal orientations across educational transitions. The existing results concerning goal stability are diverse. On one hand, studies evidence moderate to high stability (i.e., stability indexed by a correlation between two measurement points) in students' achievement goals or goal orientations between school years (e.g., Meece & Miller, 2001; Middleton, Kaplan, & Midgley, 2004; Tuominen-Soini et al., 2011) and even moderate stability in goal orientations across an educational transition (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Anderman & Midgley, 1997). On the other hand, the presence of moderate to high rank-order stability does not exclude the possibility of mean level changes even within the same samples, and, accordingly, research has also suggested that achievement goal endorsement varies over time.

Studies investigating goal stability across educational transitions suggest that mastery goals are strongly endorsed in elementary school, but that, after the transition to middle school, students become less oriented towards mastery goals (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Shim, Ryan, & Anderson, 2008). In contrast, performance goals have shown to increase (Anderman & Anderman, 1999) or remain stable (Anderman & Midgley, 1997) during the transition to middle school. Differentiating performance orientation into separate approach and avoidance components, Shim et al. (2008) found that mastery, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals all declined during the middle school transition; however, the major source of the overall decline was within year (i.e., from fall to spring in both sixth and seventh grades), not between years (i.e., from spring of sixth grade to fall of seventh grade). Hence, they concluded that moving into a new, larger school environment does not necessarily lead to dramatic shifts in level of goals. Less is known about the developmental shifts in work avoidance goals during educational transitions, but some evidence exists about these shifts within and between school years, suggesting that the endorsement of these goals remains moderately stable over time (Chouinard & Roy, 2008; Tuominen-Soini et al., 2011).

More generally, studies have revealed that educational transitions are a risk factor for academic motivation as they are often associated with negative effects, such as decreased academic value and interest, lower academic achievement, diminished feelings of competence, and increased stress (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Roeser et al., 1999; Rudolph et al., 2001; Wigfield et al., 2006). Then again, not all students experience the declining motivation. The risk appears to be

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