



## Feeling and showing: A new conceptualization of dispositional teacher enthusiasm and its relation to students' interest



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### ABSTRACT

Although teacher enthusiasm is a relevant variable in the teaching context, a clear definition is still lacking. Research on teacher enthusiasm is characterized by ambiguous conceptualizations of enthusiasm as either an affective characteristic of teachers or behaviors of expressiveness. Integrating these two notions, a new conceptualization of dispositional teacher enthusiasm, defined by teachers' positive affect and positive emotional expressivity, was developed. It was hypothesized that dispositional teacher enthusiasm would relate to students' interest, mediated by students' perceived teacher enthusiasm. Based on a correlational study design, secondary teachers ( $N = 75$ ) from Switzerland reported on their enthusiasm, complemented by student ratings ( $N = 1523$ ) on perceived enthusiasm and interest. Multilevel structural equation modeling revealed that dispositional teacher enthusiasm positively predicted students' interest, which was fully mediated by students' perceived enthusiasm, providing the basis of a valid definition of teacher enthusiasm. Based on this integrative definition, implications for future research are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

*Act enthusiastic and you will be enthusiastic.* (Dale Carnegie, 1888–1955)

When reviewing the educational literature, talking with student–teachers about what makes a good teacher, or reminiscing about teachers in one's own schooling experiences, encountering the term “enthusiasm” is almost inevitable. The term usually is applied to those teachers who had a certain, contagious fire in them, who burned for their subject and transmitted interest, curiosity and joy for learning and subject-related tasks. In educational research, teacher enthusiasm as a topic of scientific scrutiny emerged during the 1960s. Since then, it has been suggested that teacher enthusiasm is a key element of effective, high-quality teaching (e.g., Brophy & Good, 1986), a desirable characteristic of good teachers (e.g., Feldman, 2007), and an essential ingredient of supportive classrooms (e.g., Kunter et al., 2008).

This widely agreed on importance of teacher enthusiasm might stem from its ability to positively impact students' progress and learning. Studies with experimental or repeated-measures designs have shown that a variety of student outcomes seem to benefit from teacher enthusiasm. For instance, scholars have demonstrated that students' cognitive learning (e.g., achievement; Kunter et al., 2013; see also Keller, Neumann, & Fischer, 2013) is positively influenced by teacher enthusiasm. Other positive outcomes include motivational (e.g., intrinsic motivation; Patrick, Hisley, & Kempler, 2000), affective (e.g., enjoyment; Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun, & Sutton, 2009), and behavioral characteristics (e.g., attention; Bettencourt, Gillett, Gall, & Hull, 1983). Synthesizing the results of these studies, it can be hypothesized that teacher enthusiasm first and foremost is associated with students' motivational and affective outcomes (e.g., enjoyment, interest), whereas achievement is indirectly related to enthusiasm, mediated by students' motivation or attention during class (see also Allen, Witt, & Wheelless, 2006).

Of all the student outcomes related to teacher enthusiasm, students' interest is of particular importance. As a combination of intrinsic value and enjoyment (e.g., Krapp, 2007), interest is likely to benefit from teacher enthusiasm based on two central mechanisms – *value induction* and *emotional contagion*. These

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mechanisms explain *how* teacher enthusiasm exerts influence on students' outcomes (see for example, Keller et al., 2013). In both mechanisms, enthusiastic teachers provide cues during the act of teaching that allow students to deduce the teacher's personal value and enjoyment. Students consequently experience value and enjoyment themselves, reflective of elevated levels of interest. Drawing on theories of academic interest (e.g., Hidi & Renninger, 2006), it can be hypothesized that students' perceptions of teachers' enthusiasm provide the environmental trigger that results in students' initial situational interest. When students adopt the personal value exemplified by the enthusiastic teacher, situational interest can be transformed into individual interest. Given these likely pathways, the present study investigates the role of teacher enthusiasm in student interest.

Existing research supports the argument that teacher enthusiasm is important (Brophy & Good, 1986; Kunter et al., 2013), though the notion of what teacher enthusiasm is has varied considerably. Much of this uncertainty is due to the fact that teacher enthusiasm has been investigated in educational research over a number of decades and by researchers with different backgrounds (education, educational psychology, etc.). To clearly speak about teacher enthusiasm as an important characteristic of teachers and supportive classroom environments, we need to be able to clearly define what we mean by teacher enthusiasm. Starting with the term itself, the Oxford English Dictionary describes enthusiasm as "intense and eager enjoyment, interest, or approval" (Stevenson & Waite, 2011). In research, teacher enthusiasm has been described as a teacher's positive affective experiences when engaged with teaching (Kunter, Frenzel, Nagy, Baumert, & Pekrun, 2011; Kunter et al., 2008). Enthusiastic teaching also is connected to behaviors of expressiveness (see Keller et al., 2013) that denote the teacher's liking and positive affect connected to the subject and teaching itself. On the one hand, teacher enthusiasm can be considered as a dispositional characteristic of teachers and described as a form of strong, positive affective connection a teacher feels toward teaching and his/her subject. On the other hand, teacher enthusiasm can be considered as a set of demonstrated behaviors in a classroom related to the positive affective experience. A gap in the literature exists in that no known studies have brought together these two notions of teacher enthusiasm. More precisely, it is not clear whether teacher enthusiasm as an affective characteristic is sufficient in precipitating behaviors of enthusiasm. It is the aim of the present study to clarify these aspects by conceptualizing a new form of dispositional teacher enthusiasm and investigating its relation to behaviorally shown teacher enthusiasm, as perceived by students, as well as students' interest.

### 1.1. Teacher enthusiasm: its conceptualization

#### 1.1.1. Teacher enthusiasm as instructional behavior

In the educational research literature, teacher enthusiasm most often has been conceptualized as an instructional behavior (e.g., Brophy & Good, 1986). Enthusiastic teaching has from the beginning been considered in terms of expressiveness. Rosenshine (1970) called it animated teaching and summarized research that described enthusiastic teaching as buoyant, lively, or the opposite of dull. Collins (1978) devised indicators for enthusiastic teaching including use of gestures or lively facial expression. In a post-hoc study, Murray (1983; see also 2007) identified additional indicators, such as display of interest or humor. Other researchers (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 1983; Patrick et al., 2000) have employed these (mostly nonverbal) behaviors of expressiveness in their conceptualizations of enthusiastic teaching. Altogether, research evidence based on the

conceptualization of teacher enthusiasm as an instructional behavior points toward associated behaviors that are largely, if not exclusively, behaviors of expressiveness that denote a teacher's passion and enjoyment.

#### 1.1.2. Teacher enthusiasm as a personality trait

As Kunter et al. (2008) point out, the behavioral conceptualization, which stays purely on the surface level, is not suitable in explaining the internal processes of teachers. According to Kunter et al., teacher enthusiasm can also – but, as we argue, not necessarily contrarily – be conceptualized as a trait-like characteristic of teachers. As an affective component of teacher motivation, enthusiasm refers to a teacher's positive affective experience (e.g., enjoyment, pleasure and excitement) while teaching. In this way, enthusiasm can be regarded as a "trait-like, habitual, recurring emotion" (Kunter et al., 2008, p. 470). Kunter et al. distinguished between a teaching-related and a content-related dimension of this trait-like enthusiasm. The teaching dimension, in particular, was found to be highly predictive of motivationally supportive instructional behaviors such as autonomy, social support, and monitoring. Trait-like enthusiasm corresponds to high-quality teaching and impacts student outcomes (e.g., enjoyment; Kunter et al., 2013). What remains to be shown, however, is whether such variables also relate to the behaviors of expressiveness conceptualized as enthusiastic teaching in prior research.

Frenzel et al. (2009) have contributed to what is known about teacher enthusiasm as a trait. They assessed teachers' enthusiastic teaching by means of students' perceptions on a global, high-inference scale. Enthusiastic teaching was positively related to teachers' self-reported enjoyment in the teaching context. Although Frenzel et al. (2009) did not denote teacher enjoyment as enthusiasm, their operationalization of enjoyment reflects a construct fairly similar, if not identical, to Kunter et al. (2008)'s construct of enthusiasm (see also Kunter et al., 2011). In contrast to enthusiastic teaching as a behavior, teacher enthusiasm as a personality trait can be defined as a tendency to experience positive affect during teaching.

In summary, there are two different, if overlapping and interdependent, notions of teacher enthusiasm present in the educational literature: (1) teacher enthusiasm as an instructional behavior, mostly nonverbal behaviors of expressiveness, and (2) teacher enthusiasm as a positive affective trait of teachers, denoting enjoyment and pleasure during teaching. To what extent these conceptions overlap, and whether and how they may be integrated into an overarching concept of teacher enthusiasm, still remain to be shown. In the present study, we integrate the two positions in order to consider both emotional expressivity and positive affect as constituents of dispositional teacher enthusiasm.

#### 1.1.3. The role of emotional expressivity in teacher enthusiasm

Emotional expressivity can be defined as "individual differences in the extent to which people outwardly display their emotions" (Kring, Smith, & Neale, 1994, p. 934). Although different facets of emotional expressivity have been postulated and are empirically supported, the different approaches share the notion of positive and negative emotional expressivity as two distinct sub-facets of emotional expressivity (Gross & John, 1998; King & Emmons, 1990; Kring et al., 1994). Positive emotional expressivity denotes the tendency to express positive emotions (e.g., enjoyment, pride). Conversely, negative emotional expressivity denotes the tendency to express negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger). As teacher enthusiasm has been conceptualized as a form of positive affect, we will only consider positive emotional expressivity of teachers for the purposes of this study.

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