



Need satisfaction as a mediator between classroom goal structures and students' optimal educational experience



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ABSTRACT

Goal-related messages in a classroom are associated with students' experiences and functioning in learning. However, little is known about need satisfaction as a mediator that translates the classroom messages into students' optimal educational experience. In the present studies, we investigated in a sample of 171 (in Study 1) and 255 (in Study 2) Turkish undergraduate students (60% females; $M_{age} = 19.79$, $SD = 1.68$ and 45% females, $M_{age} = 19.75$, $SD = 1.67$ respectively), the relation of classroom goal structures to students' educational satisfaction (or vitality) and state flow through their experience of need satisfaction considering it as the psychological mediator. Path analysis with bootstrap showed that mastery goal structures (i.e., classroom environment focuses on learning and self-improvement) were positively related to need satisfaction while performance goal structures (i.e., classroom environment focuses on normative success) were either negatively related (Study 1) or unrelated (Study 2) to need satisfaction. Path analysis with bootstrap also showed that mastery goal structures were related to vitality, educational satisfaction and flow in class-related tasks through need satisfaction. Understanding need satisfaction as a mediator of classroom goal structures and optimal educational experience help teachers to reconsider their goal-related messages in the classroom.

1. Introduction

The motivational environment that teachers create in the classroom is related to students' psychological experience and functioning in educational settings. Studies conducted in the framework of Achievement Goal Theory (AGT; Elliot & Dweck, 2005) have shown that when students perceive that their teachers are focusing on learning and orienting them towards self-improvement (i.e., mastery goal structures; MGSs) compared to competition and normative success (i.e., performance goal structures; PGSs), they report adaptive patterns of behavior, affect and cognition (Kaplan & Midgley, 1999; Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013). However, little is known about the need-related psychological experience that translates the learning-oriented classroom messages into adaptive patterns of behavior, affect, and cognition.

Up to now, mostly, competence-based motivation (such as students' achievement goals or self-efficacy) has been considered as a mediator between classroom goal structures and educational outcomes (Fast et al., 2010; Michou, Mouratidis, Lens, & Vansteenkiste, 2013; Shim, Cho, & Wang, 2013). In the present study, we assumed that students'

adaptive functioning in MGSs are also related to students' satisfaction of their psychological needs as they have been defined by Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). On the one hand, MGSs respect students' own pace in developing their competence and empowers learning instead of competition (Meece, 1991; Patrick & Ryan, 2005). Consequently, it can help students to satisfy their own needs, such as being agents of their own actions (satisfaction of need for autonomy), feeling competent in classroom activities (satisfaction of need for competence) and relating their actions to those of others (satisfaction of need for relatedness). On the other hand, when students perceive their teachers focusing on performance and normative success (i.e., PGSs), they report less adaptive patterns of behavior, affect and cognition (Kaplan & Midgley, 1999; Meece et al., 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013). Probably, this is because students feel forced to follow and overcome others' pace in learning (frustration of need for autonomy), prove their ability (frustration of need for competence) and be opponents to their classmates (frustration of need for relatedness).

In an experimental laboratory study, Standage, Duda, and Pensgaard (2005) found that a mastery oriented environment during a co-ordination dance task was positively related to participants' need

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satisfaction and subjective well-being, while a performance oriented environment was negatively related to need satisfaction and well-being. However, this relation has not been investigated in educational settings. Moreover, even though there is evidence for an interaction of MGSs and PGSs in the prediction of educational outcomes (see [Skaalvik & Federici, 2016](#)), it has not been investigated whether perceived MGSs are positively related to need satisfaction independently of perceived PGSs or whether the two types of classroom goal structures interact in the prediction of need satisfaction. As MGSs conceptually seem compatible with need satisfaction, when such structures are perceived high by students in a classroom, they may attenuate the negative relationship of perceived performance goal structures to need satisfaction. If so, the interaction between MGSs and PGSs may also have an indirect effect on students' functioning and educational experience.

The first aim of the present study is to examine if students' need satisfaction is one of the mediators that translates the perceived classroom goal-related messages to educational experiences and therefore, whether the need satisfaction mediates the relation between students' perceived classroom goal structures and their educational satisfaction, vitality and state flow as indicators of their optimal educational experience. The second aim of the present study is to investigate to what extent the two types of the classroom goal-related messages, mastery and performance, are independently related to need satisfaction, and whether or not high perception of one type moderates the relation of the other type to need satisfaction. We believe that understanding need satisfaction as the mediator of classroom goal-related messages and optimal educational experiences help to reconsider the value of MGSs or PGSs.

1.1. Classroom goal structures

Classroom goal structures can be defined as teachers' goal-related messages that are communicated to students during classroom activities ([Ames, 1992](#); [Murayama & Elliot, 2009](#); [Urdan, 2004a](#)). For example, if a teacher emphasizes the demonstration of high competence proved by distinguished achievement, students tend to perceive that they should study to outperform others. Alternatively, if a teacher stresses understanding, learning, and self-improvement, students perceive that they need to study in order to learn and develop their competence in the given field. These two different examples correspond to PGSs and MGSs, respectively. MGSs indicate that the classroom environment is oriented towards understanding and learning, while PGSs mean that the classroom climate is oriented towards a normative success ([Anderman & Midgley, 1997](#); [Covington, 2000](#); [Midgley et al., 1998](#); [Murayama & Elliot, 2009](#); [Nicholls, 1984](#)).

Previous research showed that MGSs have adaptive while PGSs have maladaptive outcomes. Specifically, MGSs are positively associated with intrinsic motivation and academic self-concept ([Murayama & Elliot, 2009](#)), self-efficacy ([Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996](#)), use of effective learning strategies such as self-regulated learning ([Wolters, 2004](#)), deep level learning strategies ([Michou et al., 2013](#); [Miki & Yamauchi, 2005](#)) and the experience of flow ([Harwood, Keegan, Smith, & Raine, 2015](#)). PGSs, on the other hand, are negatively related to intrinsic motivation ([Meece et al., 2006](#)), positively associated with surface level learning ([Miki & Yamauchi, 2005](#)), and self-handicapping strategies ([Urdan & Midgley, 2001](#)) or unrelated to learning strategies and achievement ([Matos, Lens, Vansteenkiste, & Mouratidis, 2017](#)). Few studies have also investigated the effects of multiple goal structures (i.e., focus on both MGSs and PGSs) on optimal educational experience. For instance, [Linnenbrink \(2005\)](#) found in an experimental study that the multiple goal structures condition has a positive and a significant effect on help seeking and achievement in elementary school students. [Peng, Cherg, and Chen \(2013\)](#), however, found that the multiple goal structures condition did not differ from the MGSs condition regarding their positive effects on creativity. [Peng et al.'s \(2013\)](#) finding indicates that the MGSs are enough to enhance high school students' creativity.

Since MGSs and PGSs predict different optimal educational experiences, they might also create different psychological experiences that mediate the relationship between students' perception about classroom goal structures and educational outcomes. The mediated psychological experiences can include, among others, the degree of students' psychological need satisfaction as it has been described by SDT ([Deci & Ryan, 2000](#)). By considering need satisfaction as the psychological experience that link classroom goals structures to outcomes, we deemed important to investigate also whether the need satisfaction is higher when multiple goal structures are perceived in a classroom compared to when one type of goal structures is perceived high and the other low.

1.2. Need satisfaction

According to SDT, there are three basic psychological needs: the need for autonomy, the need for competence, and the need for relatedness ([Ryan & Deci, 2000](#)). The need for autonomy refers to a sense of volition and agency. The need for competence corresponds to a sense of effectiveness, while the need for relatedness refers to a sense of belongingness and connectedness to others. When these needs are satisfied, personal growth and optimal functioning are achieved, whereas when the basic psychological needs are unmet, people experience ill-being ([Ryan & Deci, 2000](#)).

Research has shown that need satisfaction in educational settings enhances intrinsic motivation in the classroom ([Niemiec & Ryan, 2009](#)) and predicts students' general subjective well-being ([Sheldon & Elliot, 1999](#)), positive affect, school satisfaction ([Tian, Chen, & Huebner, 2014](#)), academic satisfaction and personal well-being ([Mavor, Platow, & Bizumic, 2017, p.187](#)), and school engagement ([Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008](#)). Similarly, in other settings, need satisfaction is related to flow experience ([Schüler & Brandstätter, 2013](#); [Schüler, Brandstätter, & Sheldon, 2013](#)) and well-being ([Gagne, Ryan, & Bergman, 2003](#); [Reinboth & Duda, 2006](#)) in sport, identity exploration during identity formation ([Madjar & Cohen-Malayev, 2013](#)), and pro-environmental behavior ([Pelletier, 2002](#)).

Previous research, thus, suggest that, optimal functioning and subjective-well-being are strongly associated with need satisfaction. Moreover, previous research that aimed to unveil the environmental conditions that facilitate individuals' need satisfaction have showed that when teachers are need-supportive, (e.g., give choices to and share the decision-making process with students) instead of being controlling (e.g., force students to act in particular ways), students report higher levels of need satisfaction ([Niemiec & Ryan, 2009](#); [Reeve, 2009](#)). More specifically, research findings have indicated a mediating role of need satisfaction between need-supportive environment and positive outcomes. For example, it has been shown that need satisfaction mediates the relationship between perceptions of coach autonomy support and well-being ([Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2012](#)), secondary school students' perceived autonomy support and autonomous motivation ([Haerens, Aelterman, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Van Petegem, 2015](#)), and adolescents' perceived structure (i.e. perception of clear expectations and scaffolding provided by the teacher) and learning strategies and affect ([Mouratidis, Vansteenkiste, Michou, & Lens, 2013](#); [Reeve, 2006](#)).

Thus, a considerable amount of research suggests that need satisfaction can be considered as a necessary psychological experience which mediates the relationship between need-supportive environment and individuals' well-being. The question is, therefore, to what extent need satisfaction can be also considered a necessary mediator between classroom goal structures and students' optimal educational experiences. Research in the sport context, for instance, has shown that perceived mastery climate was positively related to hip-hop dancers' need satisfaction ([Quested & Duda, 2009](#)). This is because mastery-focused climate fosters feelings of belongingness, feelings of efficacy ([Harwood et al., 2015](#)) and feelings of agency ([Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2003](#)). However, performance-focused climate seems either to be

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