



## Teachers' professional goal orientations: Importance for further training and sick leave

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### ABSTRACT

The present study examined the relevance of teachers' individual goal orientations for the attendance of further training and sick leave in the teaching profession. Regression analysis indicated a positive effect of learning goal orientation (i.e., the desire to improve one's teaching skills and knowledge) along with a negative effect of work avoidance (i.e., the desire to keep one's workload as low as possible) on the number of attended trainings. The opposite pattern was seen with regard to the number of reported sick days. These effects persisted even when relevant attitudes (i.e., attitude toward further training) and perceptions (i.e., perceived occupational strain) were taken into account.

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### 1. Theoretical background

Reform efforts within the school system widely rely on teachers, but changes in the classroom and during lessons require a great deal of learning and can only be achieved if teachers have appropriate support and show the necessary will to reconstruct their practice (see Borko, 2004; Spillane, 1999). Recent approaches have even called for lifelong learning and continuous improvement of professional skills among teachers (Borko, 2004). At the same time, however, several studies on teacher burnout have shown that the daily workload of teachers is characterized by a high degree of stress, which—for many teachers—results in a depressed mood, poor performance, impaired health, and even premature retirement (see Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1996).

Despite these high demands within the teaching profession, there are some teachers who seem to be more successful than others at coping with daily demands while still having the capacity for further qualification and self-improvement—all of which raises the question of possible individual determinants. In the present study, we wish to determine the role of goal orientations as an element of professional motivation for teachers' attitudes and behavior toward *professional development* (indicated by the attitude toward further training and the number of attended trainings) and for their degree of *vocational*

*burden* (indicated by perceived occupational strain and the number of sick days).

#### 1.1. Teachers' goal orientations

Goal orientations (also named achievement goals) define why and how people are trying to achieve various objectives in achievement settings and thus provide a framework for extensive research on motivational orientations that contributes to individuals' adaptive and maladaptive patterns of engagement (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007). Only recently the concept of goal orientations was applied to the description and analysis of professional motivation among teachers (Butler, 2007) and an increasing body of work has focused on the effects of professional goal orientations on teaching and teachers' characteristics (Butler & Shibaz, 2008; Fasching, Dresel, Dickhäuser, & Nitsche, 2011; Nitsche, Dickhäuser, Fasching, & Dresel, 2011; Retelsdorf, Butler, Streblow, & Schiefele, 2010). The idea of applying goal orientation theory to the topic of teacher motivation essentially rests on the assumption that teachers differ in the extent to which they interpret their own professional activities as learning and/or achievement oriented. Based on the conceptualizations of Dweck and Leggett (1988), Elliot and Church (1997) as well as Nicholls (1989), the literature on teachers' goal orientations differentiates four distinct dimensions: *learning goal orientation* (the desire to increase one's own competencies), *performance approach goal orientation* (the desire to demonstrate higher competencies than other teachers), *performance avoidance goal orientation* (the desire to hide lower competencies than other teachers) and finally, *work avoidance* (the desire to reduce one's workload as much as possible).

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The goal orientation approach proposes that goals individuals are pursuing create the framework within which they interpret and react to events and result in different patterns of affect, cognition and behavior (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Following this idea, the next two sections will present theoretical considerations and empirical indications why teachers' goal orientations should be important for both professional development and vocational burden.

### 1.2. Goal orientations and professional development

Goal orientations are a key variable in several models of self-regulated learning (e.g., Boekaerts & Niemivirta, 2000; Butler & Winne, 1995; Pintrich, 2000). According to Pintrich (2000) all models of self-regulation assume that goals serve as a “gauge against which to assess the operation of the system and then guide regulatory processes” (page 472). The orientation toward certain goals thus should elicit distinct processes of self-regulation which are beneficial to make progress toward these goals. For example, if individuals are motivated to increase their competencies (learning goal orientation), they should orient their monitoring processes to cues that show progress in learning and approach more learning opportunities. In contrast, if individuals are motivated to demonstrate higher competencies than others (performance approach goal orientation) or hide a presumed lack of competencies (performance avoidance goal orientation), they should orient their monitoring processes to the comparison with others and use regulation strategies that maximize the probability to show superior and not inferior performance respectively. Although work avoidance is not included in Pintrich's models of self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 2000), it is reasonable to assume that individuals with a higher work avoidance invest less effort and are primarily concerned with finishing their duties quickly (Urduan, 1997).

Even though these theoretical assumptions for goal orientations are in line with empirical research on students (see Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Pintrich, 2000 for a review), the relevance of goal orientations for teachers' learning and professional development had not been addressed, yet. However, recent studies indicate that goal orientations may be similarly important for the initiation and regulation of competence-related activities in teachers. Learning goal orientation could be associated with higher professional reflection, greater interest in teaching, higher self-efficacy, the perception of help seeking as beneficial and a preference for autonomous help that enables teachers to solve future job-related problems on their own (Butler, 2007; Dickhäuser, Butler, & Tönjes, 2007; Nitsche et al., 2011; Retelsdorf et al., 2010; Runhaar, Sanders, & Yang, 2010). Performance approach goal orientation was related only to higher self-efficacy (Nitsche et al., 2011). By contrast, performance avoidance goal orientation was associated with lower self-efficacy, the perception of help seeking as threatening and less frequent utilization of collegial help (Butler, 2007; Nitsche et al., 2011) and work avoidance was associated with less interest in teaching activities, the perception of help seeking as expedient and a preference for expedient help (Butler, 2007; Nitsche et al., 2011; Retelsdorf et al., 2010).

Although these results urge the importance of goal orientations for competence-related attitudes and behavior in teachers, there are, as yet, no studies that examine the role of goal orientations for teachers' learning and professional development. In order to expand our knowledge of how individual motivational factors are related to teachers' attitudes and behavior toward professional development, the first objective of the present study is to examine whether goal orientations can predict (a) individual attitudes toward further training and (b) the number of attended training workshops.

Since learning goal orientation is concerned with improving professional skills and knowledge, we assume that individuals with a higher learning goal orientation display a more positive attitude toward further training and report a greater number of attended

training workshops. In contrast, we expect that individuals with high performance avoidance goal orientation have a less positive attitude toward further training and report fewer attended training workshops, since attending such training might reveal their own deficits which, in turn, would impede their goal to hide a presumed lack of competence. Similarly, individuals displaying high work avoidance should see further training as less positive and attend such training less frequently, as further training is generally associated with additional work which, again, would be counterproductive to their own goal; namely, reducing work effort. We have no specific assumption for performance approach goal orientation, since the attendance of further training may be seen as both an opportunity to competence demonstration (which would suggest a positive association) and an indicator of competence deficits (which would suggest a negative association).

In addition, we seek to examine whether the association between goal orientations and the *number of attended trainings* is mediated by attitude toward further training.

### 1.3. Goal orientations and vocational burden

In line with Dweck and Leggett's (1988) assumption that goal orientations create a framework within which individuals interpret and react to events, it was argued that goal orientations may also be of particular importance for individuals' psychological and physical well-being (e.g., Dykman, 1998; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997; Kaplan & Maehr, 1999). Dweck and Leggett (1988) initially pointed out that, in the face of failure, individuals with a high learning goal orientation show a “mastery-oriented” response pattern (including constructive self-instructions and self-monitoring, optimism, positive affect, and effective problem-solving strategies) whereas individuals with a high performance goal orientation who perceive their abilities to be low show a “helpless” response pattern (including avoidance of challenge, negative self-cognitions, negative affect and impaired performance). Kaplan and Maehr (1999) argued that, in the long term, such differing experiences of failure would influence individuals' well-being beyond situational affect. Elliot and Church (1997) refined the statement about performance goal orientation and suggested that only the pursuit of performance avoidance goals, but not performance approach goals is characterized as self-regulation according to potential negative outcomes. Following Elliot and Sheldon (1998) as well as Elliot, Thrash, and Murayama (2011), this focus on negative outcomes and this use of negative possibilities as the hub of self-regulation is likely to evoke a variety of maladaptive cognitive and affective processes (like threat appraisal, worries, distraction, anxiety, low perceived progress, rumination and sensitivity to negative information) that are detrimental to psychological well-being and physical health.

In line with these assumptions, several empirical studies indicated performance avoidance goal orientation to be a negative predictor and learning goal orientation to be a positive predictor of psychological and physical well-being (e.g., Dykman, 1998; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997, 1998; Elliot et al., 2011; Finsterwald, Ziegler, & Dresel, 2009; Kaplan & Maehr, 1999).

Applying this line of reasoning to the teaching profession it can be argued that teachers' goal orientations affect the handling of failure and setbacks as well as the experience of vocational burden. Accordingly, several studies found learning goal orientation to be associated with lower symptoms of burnout whereas performance avoidance goal orientation was associated with higher burnout symptoms (Retelsdorf et al., 2010; Tönjes & Dickhäuser, 2009; Tönjes, Dickhäuser, & Kröner, 2008). Beyond that, even work avoidance was associated with higher burnout (Retelsdorf et al., 2010). Although work avoidance was never explicitly considered in relation to students' well-being, it appears to be associated with a more negative cognition and behavior pattern, similar to a performance avoidance

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