



The role of perceived need satisfaction at work for teachers' work-related learning goal orientation



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We investigate antecedents of teachers' work related learning goal orientation.
- We therefore combine research on achievement goals with Self Determination Theory.
- Need satisfaction at work predicts teachers' work related learning goal orientation.
- Intrinsic work motivation does not mediate this association.
- Differential effects of all three basic psychological needs can be shown.

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, we investigate whether perceived satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in teachers' working environment at school predicts their work-related learning goal orientation. Structural equation modeling was used to test this hypothesis ($N = 334$ German teachers). The expected relationship between perceived need satisfaction and teachers' work-related learning goal orientation could be shown and was not mediated by teachers' intrinsic work motivation. These results give room for speculation on new ways to foster teachers' work-related learning goal orientation via workplace modifications which address teachers' basic psychological needs.

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1. Introduction

Teachers face many achievement situations in their daily work lives, such as teaching difficult students, fulfilling the expectations of parents, and keeping up with the intended curriculum. While all teachers experience these situations, they differ in what goals they ultimately aim to achieve. These individual goal preferences are typically referred to as teachers' work-related achievement goal orientations (Butler, 2007; Nitsche, Dickhäuser, Fasching, & Dresel, 2011). In this article we focus on one specific work-related achievement goal orientation, namely teachers' work-related learning goal orientation. This can be conceptualized as the striving for professional development in work-related achievement

situations. Hence, teachers with a high work-related learning goal orientation experience accomplishment when they are able to acquire new job related skills. Teachers' work-related learning goal orientation is positively associated with a wide range of beneficial outcome variables. For instance, students of teachers with a stronger work-related learning goal orientation view their teachers as more supportive (Butler & Shibaz, 2008). Furthermore, teachers reporting a higher work-related learning goal orientation also reported more instructional practices aiming at the development of learning goals in their students (Retelsdorf, Butler, Streblov, & Schiefele, 2010), more self-reflection regarding their own teaching practices (Runhaar, Sanders, & Yang, 2010) and a higher emphasis on comprehensive learning (Retelsdorf & Günther, 2011). These teachers also reported lower burn-out tendencies (Parker, Martin, Colmar, & Liem, 2012; Tönjes & Dickhäuser, 2009), fewer sick days and a higher attendance at training workshops (Nitsche, Dickhäuser, Fasching, & Dresel, 2013). Lastly, teachers' work-related learning goal orientation is associated with a positive

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attitude towards seeking help from colleagues (Butler, 2007). These studies were conducted in Australia (Parker et al., 2012), Germany (Nitsche et al., 2013; Retelsdorf & Günther, 2011; Retelsdorf et al., 2010; Tönjes & Dickhäuser, 2009), Israel (Butler, 2007; Butler & Shibaz, 2008) and the Netherlands (Runhaar et al., 2010). Evidence for the importance of teachers' work-related learning goals was also found in Canada (Daniels, Frenzel, Stupnisky, Stewart, & Perry, 2013), Finland (Malmberg, 2006, 2008), and Greece (Papaioannou & Christodoulidis, 2007). Thus, the beneficial effects of teachers' work-related learning goal orientation are generalizable to different Western educational systems. From the viewpoint of society and school boards, it might therefore be useful to know which methods and strategies may enhance teachers' work-related learning goal orientation. However, we know very little about which aspects of the working environment could be addressed to enhance the strength of teachers' work-related learning goal orientation. In this article, we investigate teachers' perception of their working environment as a possible influencing factor for their work-related learning goal orientation. More specifically, we will address the perceived satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness in teachers' working place. We assume that teachers are more likely to develop a work-related learning goal orientation when they feel their basic psychological needs are satisfied in their current working environment. This assumption is based on the theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory.

2. Teachers' motivation through the lens of Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) serves as a theoretical lens for our reflections on teachers' work-related learning goal orientation. The theory centers on the human striving to satisfy the three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness as well as the importance of need satisfaction for human motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). The need for *autonomy* is defined as the urge to be under control of one's own life decisions. Individuals experience autonomy when they come to believe that they are free to choose between different meaningful options regarding one's actions and goals (see Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Reeve, Nix, & Hamm, 2003). Research has shown that impairment of this need in teachers' working environment can lead to a decrease in teachers' intrinsic work motivation and also reduce support for student autonomy (Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque, & Legault, 2002; Reeve, 2009). The need for *competence* is defined as the urge to feel as though one's actions are effective (Arkes, 1978; Deci & Ryan, 2002; White, 1959). Teachers who perceive themselves as competent at their job are less stressed and report more enthusiasm for their job compared to teachers reporting a low degree of competence (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Finally, the need for *relatedness* emphasizes the importance of social inclusion and feeling connected to other people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Researchers have emphasized the importance of relatedness to colleagues for motivation and well-being at work (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004).

To explain the relationship between teachers' basic psychological needs and their work-related learning goal orientation, it is important to understand how need satisfaction affects humans. First and foremost, need satisfaction is always a subjective experience. Previous studies have shown that perceived need satisfaction is sensitive to environmental cues such as choice (Assor et al., 2002; Katz & Assor, 2007), feedback (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Vallerand & Reid, 1984), interpersonal signs of affection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), or ostracism (Williams, 2009).

However, the effects of these environmental cues always depend on the personal interpretation of them (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002). This makes self-reported perceived need satisfaction a more accurate predictor of human motivation and well-being than objective need support (Broeck, Vansteenkiste, Witte, Soenens, & Lens, 2010; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012). Hence, we will focus on teachers' perceived need satisfaction in order to gauge its importance at their workplace. Another important aspect of the mechanism behind need satisfaction is the interdependence of the different basic psychological needs. Deci and Ryan (2000) pointed out that none of the basic psychological needs can be compensated. All three needs are assumed to be equally important for healthy human functioning. Hence, the effect of need satisfaction can only be fully experienced when all three are satisfied. While it might still be interesting to investigate unique effects of the different needs (e.g., Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000), researchers have often aggregated them into one construct labeled *need satisfaction* in order to properly address their shared effect on human motivation (Deci, Ryan, et al., 2001; Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009). This approach was also applied to research on need satisfaction at work (Gagné & Deci, 2005) and, specifically, in the teaching profession (Hanfstingl, Andreitz, Müller, & Thomas, 2011). In our research, we will address the shared influence of the three basic psychological needs as well as their unique impact. While the shared influence shows the importance of perceived need satisfaction in general, the differential effects by perceived autonomy, perceived competence and perceived relatedness help to uncover the individual importance of each basic psychological need.

Perceived need satisfaction has mainly been investigated in terms of its positive influence on healthy functioning (Reis et al., 2000; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008) and the development of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; for more details see Section 2.2). However, we are more interested in the importance of perceived need satisfaction for goal setting. More specifically, we want to uncover possible relations between perceived need satisfaction at the workplace and the development of teachers' work-related learning goal orientation. SDT provides a broad conceptualization of goals into which teachers' work-related learning goals can easily be incorporated. This also provides some interesting implications on possible associations with perceived need satisfaction. However, there has been little to no research bridging the gap between goal conceptualizations in SDT and achievement goals to date.

2.1. Teachers' work-related learning goal orientation as preference for intrinsic goals

SDT differentiates goals according to their content into extrinsic and intrinsic goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kasser & Ryan, 1996). *Extrinsic goals* are defined as the striving for extrinsic motivators, such as fame or money. *Intrinsic goals* conversely are defined as the striving for motivators with intrinsic worth. Typical contents of intrinsic goals are affiliation, personal growth, health, and freedom. Intrinsic goals and teachers' work related learning goals share some interesting similarities. We will now elaborate on the definition of teachers' work-related learning goal orientation to make it comparable to an orientation on intrinsic goals.

Teachers' work-related learning goal orientation is an achievement goal orientation defined on the basis of three components: aggregation level, goal content and goal valence. First, the aggregation level describes how broadly the associated achievement goal is conceptualized. While the term "achievement goals" is oftentimes used to refer to goals that only affect human motivation and behavior in specific situations, achievement goal orientations describe more stable preferences for a specific kind of achievement

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