

Classroom goal structures and hopelessness as predictors of day-to-day experience at school: Differences between students with and without learning disabilities

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to compare the everyday classroom practices of students with and without learning disabilities (LD) and attempt to predict those perceptions from classroom's motivational discourse and feelings of hopelessness. Two hundred thirty students with and without learning disabilities recorded their everyday classroom behaviours and affect over 5 consecutive days. Classroom goal structures were assessed with rating scales. Results indicated that a performance goal structure was associated with less positive affect and less engagement for students with LD. Study 2 attempted to replicate the findings of Study 1 with 120 students, 64 with learning problems and 56 typical peers. Results pointed to salient between-group differences across intercepts, with students with LD having lower levels of positive affect, higher levels of negative affect, higher perceptions of punishment, and lower engagement. Among classroom climates, a mastery goal structure was associated with enhanced reinforcement for both groups. The saliency of goal structures in influencing student behaviours was evident, as they moderated the relationship between hopelessness and students' achievement-related behaviours. Overall the findings highlighted the importance of mastery goal structures for creating positive academic environments for students with and without LD.

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Keywords: Classroom goal structures; Goal theory; Motivational climate; Learning disabilities; Hopelessness; Helplessness; Motivational discourse; Day-to-day classroom behaviours

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1. Introduction

Research examining the effects that classroom motivational environments have on student behaviour, adaptiveness to school demands, and achievement is scarce. Particularly for students with learning and other disabilities, it will be very important to identify instructional elements that will be conducive to their learning and may enhance their involvement and understanding of the subject matter, besides those that are specific to a treatment. Examples of such “packages” may involve enhancement of achievement outcomes through incorporating motivation into the curriculum. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted regarding the effects of motivation on the behaviours and affect of students with learning disabilities (LD) (Adelman & Taylor, 1983). The present studies intend to contribute to this gap by exploring how motivational climates are associated with students’ engagement, boredom, positive and negative affect, and perceptions of reinforcement or punishment from their teachers. The conceptual framework from which motivational climate originates is achievement goal theory (Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984).

2. Achievement goal theory

Goal theory has been very prominent, with its success lying on the fact that students’ classroom behaviours, affect, and achievement can be accounted for by cognitive–motivational schemata. The theory initially proposed two lines of thought, which have been described as the purposes behind goal seeking and goal involvement and were based on early observations regarding elementary student’s engagement and achievement in complex tasks (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The two major patterns of thinking that were defined were those based on an individual’s interest and intrinsic reasons behind goal involvement (mastery goals) and those that were competence based (performance goals).¹ Two revisions followed the dichotomous model, (a) inclusion of an avoidance dimension in performance goals (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996) and (b) inclusion of an avoidance dimension in mastery goals (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). The former has been well accepted (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001), whereas the latter is still debated.

With regard to research findings, those based on the mastery–performance dichotomy suggested that the former were associated with adaptive learning behaviours (Rawsthorne & Elliot, 1999), positive affect, and achievement, whereas the latter were associated with maladaptive cognitions (Pintrich, 2000), negative affect (Turner, Meyer, & Schweinle, 2003), anxiety, and even depression (Dykman, 1998; Sideridis, 2005a, b). The above findings have been challenged since performance goals were bifurcated into approach and avoidance forms. Thus, several researchers suggested that the early findings were due to the confounding of both approach and avoidance tendencies in those goals and proposed a revision of goal theory that specifically states the adaptiveness of performance–approach

¹Interestingly, around the same time, several researchers described approximately the same theoretical concepts using different terms (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984; Skaalvik, 1997). The orientation that valued normative evaluative standards was termed as *performance*, *ego*, *self-enhancing* or *defeating*; the orientation that valued achievement based on self-evaluative standards and involved intrinsic interest and motivation was termed *mastery*, *task*, or *learning*.

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