Promoting learning goals in the classroom: a preventative approach to motivational problems

Marc Groen
University of Northern Iowa

Copyright ©2002 Marc Groen
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp
Part of the Educational Psychology Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/796

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
Promoting learning goals in the classroom: a preventative approach to motivational problems

Abstract
This paper explores the implications of achievement goal theory for addressing motivational problems in the classroom. First, the basic elements of achievement goal theory are described and relevant empirical research that follows from this framework is reviewed. Next, the implications of achievement goal theory for designing motivationally healthy classroom environments as well as the potential obstacles to successful implementation of these design principles are examined.

A major conclusion of this review is that achievement goal theory provides an important preventative approach to addressing motivational problems in the classroom. Implications of this preventative approach to addressing motivational problems for the school psychologist are discussed.

This open access graduate research paper is available at UNI ScholarWorks: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/796
Promoting Learning Goals in the Classroom
A Preventative Approach to Motivational Problems
Marc A. Groen
University of Northern Iowa
Abstract

This paper explores the implications of achievement goal theory for addressing motivational problems in the classroom. First, the basic elements of achievement goal theory are described and relevant empirical research that follows from this framework is reviewed. Next, the implications of achievement goal theory for designing motivationally healthy classroom environments as well as the potential obstacles to successful implementation of these design principles are examined. A major conclusion of this review is that achievement goal theory provides an important preventative approach to addressing motivational problems in the classroom. Implications of this preventative approach to addressing motivational problems for the school psychologist are discussed.
This Research Paper by: Marc Groen

Entitled: Promoting Learning Goals in the Classroom: A Preventative Approach to Motivational Problems

Has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in Education
Educational Psychology: Professional Development for Teachers

Co-Director of Paper
Donald W. Schmits

Co-Director of Paper
Donald W. Schmits

Advisor
Barry J. Wilson

Department Head

8/29/02 Date Approved
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 5

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Section I: Achievement Goal Theory ............................................................... 7

Achievement Goals and Student Beliefs ...................................................... 8

*Ability and Effort* ................................................................................................. 9

*Errors and Learning* .......................................................................................... 11

Personal Goals and Maladaptive Behavior ................................................ 12

*Self-handicapping* ............................................................................................... 13

Avoidance of Help-Seeking ............................................................................ 15

Avoidance of Novelty and Challenge ......................................................... 16

Disruptive Behavior ......................................................................................... 18

Classroom Goal Structures and Student Goals ........................................ 19

*Self-handicapping* ............................................................................................... 20

Avoidance of Help-Seeking ............................................................................ 21

Avoidance of Novelty and Challenge ......................................................... 23

Disruptive Behavior ......................................................................................... 24

Section II: Promoting Achievement Goals in the Classroom .................... 26

The Design of Tasks and Activities .............................................................. 29

The Role of Teacher and Student Authority ........................................... 32

The Recognition of Students ........................................................................... 34

The Evaluation of Students ............................................................................ 36
Section III: Discussion and Future Directions in

Achievement Goal Theory ......................................................... 37

Implications for School Psychologists ................................. 38

Suggestions for Future Research ........................................... 40

References .................................................................................... 43

Table 1: Definitions of Learning and Performance Goals .... 49

Table 2: Classroom Structures and Instructional Strategies
Promoting a Learning Orientation .............................................. 50
Promoting Learning Goals

Chapter I: Introduction

Unmotivated students are a primary concern for educators and parents. Students may develop motivational problems for a variety of reasons. Some students may not like school, whereas other students may not feel valued at school. Unmotivated students are a concern as they are also more likely to have motivational problems and exhibit maladaptive behaviors (Kumar, Gheen, & Kaplan, 2002).

Disruptive behavior such as teasing, talking out of turn, getting out of one's seat, disrespecting others, violence, or vandalism, impedes learning in the classroom (Kaplan, Gheen, & Midgley, 2002). In addition to these overt examples of motivation problems, more subtle motivational problems such as procrastinating also inhibit student learning. When students exhibit motivational problems, school psychologists may be asked to help teachers and parents design solutions using behavioral, cognitive, or motivational interventions (Braden, DiMarino-Linnen, & Good, 2001).

Some authors suggest that school psychologists are trained to utilize behavioral interventions, while only briefly examining other approaches (Laroque, 1997; as cited in Braden, DiMarino-Linnen, & Good, 2001). Although behavioral techniques may be effective, behavioral interventions typically use a
reactive intervention model. A reactive intervention model generally initiates interventions after parents, teachers, or principals have identified problems. Other reviews of school psychology practices suggest that for school psychologists to be most effective they should become more proactive (Braden, DiMarino, & Good, 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to explore achievement goal theory, and examine whether achievement goal theory may be useful in designing proactive approaches to student interventions. In brief, achievement goal theory focuses on the underlying purposes and goals students pursue in achievement related situations as a basis for explaining adaptive and maladaptive behavior (Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan, & Midgley, 2002)

Specifically, I will examine the implications of achievement goal theory for addressing motivational problems in the classroom. First, the basic elements of achievement goal theory are described and relevant empirical research that follows from this framework is reviewed. Next, the implications of achievement goal theory for designing motivationally healthy classroom environments as well as the potential obstacles to successful implementation of these design principles are examined. A major conclusion of this review is that achievement goal theory provides an important preventative approach to addressing motivational problems in the classroom. Finally, the
implications of achievement goal theory as a preventative approach to addressing motivational problems for the school psychologist are discussed.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Section I: Achievement Goals

Achievement goal theory has become a prominent motivational theory over the past two decades. Achievement goal theory provides a comprehensive organizational framework for understanding student motivation in terms of the underlying purposes or goals students pursue in achievement related situations (Ames, 1992). Researchers using an achievement goal perspective seek to understand differences in the quality of student task engagement (Ames, 1984; Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984). For example, why do some students put forth increased effort on a challenging task, attempting to learn from the experience? Similarly, why do other students become easily frustrated with a challenging task attempting to avoid investing effort, and are only interested in getting the best grade possible? Achievement goal theory answers these questions by examining how student motivation and the classroom environment interact to impact student achievement.

Within achievement goal theory, researchers have found that the purposes students have for engaging in academic situations (e.g. achievement goals) can be categorized into different groups. Over the last two decades the literature on achievement
goals has focused on two major goal orientations, learning and performance goals. Generally, students adopting learning goals seek to develop competence (Dweck, 1986). In contrast, students adopting performance goals strive to demonstrate competence or avoid the demonstration of incompetence. The contrast in terms of developing or demonstrating competence helps us understand situations in which students can obtain similar outcomes, yet the manner in which they approach and react to tasks may be very different. For example, although a student obtains a score of 85, (the top score in the class) she still seeks out additional feedback on how she can improve. Another student also earns a score of 85, but since she receives an A, she does not ask for feedback. In this example, the first student wants to continue to develop her skills. Although earning an A may validate the effort she put into studying, she still desires to improve. In contrast, the second student’s goal was to demonstrate her ability. Since she obtained the top score in the class, she feels satisfied with her performance.

Achievement Goals and Student Beliefs

Achievement goal theory suggests that student beliefs influence student goal adoption (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988). Beliefs concerning the relationship between effort and ability and the significance of errors in the learning process are examples of beliefs that impact students’ adoption of learning and performance goals. The following section will
examine how student beliefs influence student goals and behavior.

**Ability and Effort**

The manner in which students perceive ability is an important factor which influences the goals students adopt. Learning goals have generally been associated with the belief that ability is malleable. Similarly, learning goals are associated with the belief that ability can be increased with effort (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Students who adopt learning goals tend to believe that the more effort they invest in a task corresponds to improved ability. For example, a learning goal oriented student who desires to improve in mathematics will among other things, increase the amount of time they study. Such a student would believe that the more they study, the more they will improve their ability in mathematics.

In contrast, students adopting performance goals tend to believe that ability is a fixed and relatively constant characteristic (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Performance goal oriented students may associate achievement outcomes (e.g. grades) with their ability. For example, if a student were to score high on a math test, they would be likely to attribute the high score to their ability. Similarly, students adopting
performance goals are less likely to attribute achievement outcomes to the amount of effort they invest in a task.

While closely related to beliefs about ability, achievement goal theory also suggests that the beliefs students' hold about effort influence goal adoption (Ames, 1992). Generally, students adopting learning goals believe that effort and outcome are closely related. Similarly, they have an underlying belief that the more effort they invest in accomplishing their goals, the more likely they are to be successful. For example, a student earns an A on a test, instead of attributing the high grade to her ability, she believes she earned the grade by studying hard. Furthermore, the student might put forth more effort in studying for a test, believing that the more she studies, the more likely she will do well on the test.

In contrast, students adopting performance goals believe that an inverse relationship exists between ability and effort (Ames, 1984; Covington 1984). Students adopting performance goals associate investing high levels of effort with having a low level of ability. For example, if I invest considerable effort into studying and perform poorly on an exam (e.g. relative to my peers), I might conclude that I lack ability. However, if I was able to take a test with minimal preparation (e.g. effort) and scored high, I might conclude that I have high ability. Due to this relationship, performance goal students may
avoid investing effort into tasks they believe will result in unfavorable judgments of their ability.

Errors and Learning

Students adopting learning goals consider errors to be a natural aspect of learning. They believe that errors are an important step in developing personal competence (Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Meyer, Turner, & Spencer, 1997). For example, a student who makes a mistake on her multiplication assignment might try to learn why she made the mistake. This student perceives her error as an opportunity to improve. Thus, she strives to learn from her mistake by asking for feedback. Recognizing that errors are a natural aspect of learning allows students to make mistakes, without equating error with failure.

Students adopting performance goals believe errors are a sign of incompetence or failure (Maher & Midgley, 1996). For example, a student may make five mistakes on her math worksheet, whereas her peers miss two questions. Since she scored lower than her peers, the student may believe her performance is an indication of incompetence. Students adopting performance goals perceive the classroom as a competitive environment, in which students must be, "the best" to be successful (Ames, 1992). Students who make mistakes are not likely to be the best student, therefore, students adopting performance goals place an
emphasis on avoiding errors. Since most students are likely to
make mistakes, the belief that errors are a sign of failure may
lead to decreased motivation, and can promote the use of
maladaptive behaviors (Kaplan, Gheen, & Midgley, 2002).

Personal Goals and Maladaptive Behavior

Current research within achievement goal theory makes a
distinction between personal goals and the goals that are made
salient in the learning environment. Personal goals are the
individual goals students pursue, whereas classroom goal
structures are the environmental influences that make goals
evident in the classroom. This section will examine research on
personal achievement goals.

Most research on achievement goals has focused on the
adaptive benefits of personal learning goals, in contrast to the
more maladaptive outcomes associated with personal performance
goals. Viewed from an achievement goal perspective, most
maladaptive behaviors students engage in have been seen as
strategies to avoid a perceived threat in the learning
environment (Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, & Gheen, 2002). For example,
some students may be disruptive in class to avoid completing
difficult work. From other perspectives, avoidance behaviors
where students put forth minimal effort may appear to be a
manifestation of laziness. However, within an achievement goal
framework avoidance behavior is viewed as a strategy to avoid
unfavorable judgments of ability.
Research by Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, and Gheen (2002) suggests that a number of maladaptive behaviors have been associated with performance goals. The following section will examine the relationship between personal performance goals and a number of maladaptive behaviors. Specifically, the section will address the association between performance goals and maladaptive behaviors such as: self-handicapping, help avoidance, and students who avoid new or challenging tasks. This section will conclude with current research on performance goals and disruptive behavior.

**Self-handicapping**

Self-handicapping is a process in which students actively attempt to undermine their performance (Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, Gheen, 2002). An example of self-handicapping might be a student staying up late the night before a test, so that she is unable to fully perform the next day. Before the test she may say to herself, “I’m so tired from last night I don’t think I’m going to do well on this test.” In this situation the student has purposefully acted (staying up late) to handicap her performance. When in class, the student may attribute her poor performance to a lack of sleep. Her self-handicapping has resulted in reducing the effort she needed to invest in studying for the test, and may have prevented others from making unfavorable judgments about her ability. For example, if she was
worried that she may not be able to do well on the test, she may use self-handicapping as an excuse for poor performance. It is important to remember that self-handicapping involves purposeful behavior with the intention of handicapping performance. Situational influences outside a student’s control are not instances of self-handicapping behaviors. For example, a student lacking sleep because she had been in a car accident the previous day would not be an example of self-handicapping, because she is not intentionally trying to handicap her performance.

Achievement goal theory suggests that performance goals may be an important determining factor motivating self-handicapping behaviors (Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, Gheen, 2002). According to the theory, performance goals stress the importance of student ability. If students adopting performance goals are unable to meet class expectations, they may believe others will conclude they lack ability. To circumvent this, students may use self-handicapping strategies as a means of preventing others from making unfavorable judgments.

Empirical research supports the idea that achievement goals may play a role in the use of self-handicapping behaviors (Midgley & Urdan, 1995; Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998; Midgley & Urdan, 2001). For example, Midgley and Urdan (2001) examined the relationship between achievement goals and self-
handicapping in mathematics. The study was based on a sample of 484 seventh-grade students. Using the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS), Midgley and Urdan found that performance goals were associated with students engaging in self-handicapping, whereas adopting learning goals was negatively associated with self-handicapping.

Avoidance of Help-Seeking

An important strategy for learning is asking for help. Most students encounter difficulties with their schoolwork and have questions, however, some students may avoid asking for help. Students avoid seeking help when they recognize that they require help but refuse to ask for assistance (Ryan, Gheen & Midgley, 1998). Ryan, Pintrich, and Midgley, (2001) hypothesize that students avoid seeking help so that others will not perceive them as incompetent or lacking ability. For example, a student may not understand her teacher’s instructions, however she avoids asking for help because she fears her peers will believe she’s incompetent.

A study by Ryan, Hicks, and Midgley (1997) examined the relationship between students’ academic goals and reports of help seeking. This study consisted of 443 fifth graders in 12 different elementary schools. The results of this study suggest that low achievers who adopt performance-approach goals are
particularly concerned with receiving negative evaluations of their ability. As a result low achievers adopting performance goals are more likely to avoid seeking help when needed. This situation creates a dilemma for educators, being as low achieving students most likely require more help than high achieving students. However, if they adopt performance goals they are less likely to ask for help.

Avoidance of Novelty and Challenge

Adapting to new situations and utilizing new learning strategies is a valuable skill. Students who avoid novelty or challenging situations are less able to adapt to new situations (Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, & Gheen, 2002). For example, a student avoiding challenge may repeatedly choose to solve problems in the same way, thereby avoiding the possibility of failure. Students who avoid novelty and challenge may be at risk for developing patterns of behavior that inhibit learning and performance. Studies suggest that students avoid challenges to prevent others from making unfavorable judgments of their ability, and to avoid expending effort (Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, & Gheen, 2002).

An excellent example of how avoiding challenge has been associated with learning and performance goals is a study by Elliot and Dweck (1988). In an experimental study Elliot and
Dweck (1988) examined the relationship between achievement goals and patterns of helplessness or mastery. The study included a sample of 101 fifth-grade students consisting of 57 girls and 44 boys. The results suggest that students endorsing learning goals generally chose more challenging tasks. Interestingly, students adopting performance goals also chose challenging tasks, however, the level of task difficulty was related to the student’s perceived level of ability. In other words, students chose to engage in difficult tasks only when they perceived that they could complete the task, and when completing the task would lead others to perceive them as having high ability. For example, a student might choose to avoid a challenging task in English where she tends to have more difficulty, however if she excels in Math she may choose a challenging task to demonstrate her ability.

Elliot and Dweck’s (1988) results seem reasonable as students adopting performance goals avoid unfavorable assessments of their ability. One way of avoiding negative judgments is to choose tasks in which success is assured. By choosing less challenging tasks students continue to demonstrate high performance, rather than risk the chance of failing at a challenging task. This can create a difficult situation for educators when attempting to engage students by finding the optimal level of task difficulty, since students adopting
performance goals may actively avoid challenging tasks (Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, & Gheen, 2002).

Disruptive Behavior

A major concern of parents and teachers is disruptive behavior (Bear, 1998). Disruptive behavior can be defined as teasing, talking out of turn, getting out of one's seat, disrespecting others, violence or vandalism (Kaplan, Gheed, & Midgley, 2002).

Although there is limited research on the relationship between achievement goals and disruptive behavior, a study by Kaplan and Maehr (1999) suggests that student achievement goals are related to levels of disruptive behavior in the classroom. Kaplan and Maehr (1999) examined the relationship between achievement goals and student well-being. This study included a sample of 168 sixth-grade students, consisting of 91 girls and 77 boys. The study used an original survey to assess student goals and self-reported disruptive behavior. The study found that students adopting performance goals were more likely to report disruptive behavior than students adopting learning goals. Kaplan and Maehr (1999) suggest that the relationship between personal achievement goals and disruptive behavior may have interesting implications for the schools and classrooms.
Promoting Learning Goals 19

Classroom Goal Structures and Student Goals

The personal component of achievement goals has a major impact on student achievement, however, it is also important to consider how a child's learning environment influences student motivation (Ames, 1992). Achievement goal theory suggests that classroom goal structures send messages to students concerning what is valued within the classroom (Turner, et. al., 2002). For example, does the classroom value student competition or collaborative student learning?

Classroom goal structures can be conceived of as the classroom policies or features that emphasize different achievement goals (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan, & Midgley, 2002). Examples of classroom goal structures might include: the classroom grading system, classroom organization, or the classroom rules. Generally, classroom goal structures tend to be more stable elements of the classroom that are established as part of the classroom routine.

The following section will examine the role of classroom goal structures in influencing student achievement goals. Similar to the previous section, I will review current research on achievement goals and maladaptive behavior. Specifically, I will examine the association between classrooms emphasizing performance goals and maladaptive behaviors such as: self-handicapping, help avoidance, and avoiding new or challenging
tasks. This section will conclude with current research on classroom goal structures promoting performance goals and disruptive behavior.

Classrooms Goal Structures and Self-handicapping

Recent research suggests that self-handicapping is related to classroom goal structures (Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, & Gheen, 2002). Self-handicapping can be defined as a process in which students actively attempt to undermine their performance (Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, Gheen, 2002). For example, classroom goal structures such as posted grades (e.g. honor roles) may encourage students to use self-handicapping.

A study by Midgley and Urdan (2001) examined the relationship between achievement goals and self-handicapping. The study included 484 seventh-grade students from nine middle schools in Michigan. Fifty-five percent of the sample consisted of African American Students, while the remaining forty-five percent were classified as European American. Using the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS; Midgley et. al., 1997), Midgley and Urdan (2001) found that classroom goal structures were related to personal achievement goals. Their study suggests that classrooms where students perceived an emphasis on performance goals were positively related to self-handicapping. For example, classrooms promoting student achievement rather
than understanding may promote performance goals, and likely increase student self-handicapping.

Similarly, Midgley and Urdan (2001) found that classroom goal structures promoting learning goals negatively predicted self-handicapping. Midgley and Urdan concluded that the degree to which students adopt performance goals is a major factor in self-handicapping. However, the use of learning goal structures in classrooms can help decrease self-handicapping when the emphasis on performance goals are low.

Classroom Goal Structures and Avoidance of Help-Seeking

Research suggests there is a relationship between the levels of help seeking in a classroom and classroom achievement goals. Help seeking can be defined as avoiding help when an individual recognizes that they require help but refuse to ask for assistance (Ryan, Gheen & Midgley, 1998). For example, a student may recognize that they are unable to complete their math assignment without assistance yet they refuse to seek assistance. In general, studies propose that classrooms stressing performance goals discourage students from asking for help, whereas classrooms emphasizing learning goals are positively related to help seeking (Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, & Gheen, 2002).
Arguably one of the best constructed studies on student avoidance of help seeking was conducted by Ryan, Gheen, and Midgley (1998). This study examined the relationship of help seeking with student and classroom characteristics. The study consisted of 516 sixth grade students from 63 math classrooms. Students and teachers were asked to complete a survey on a Likert-scale format. The survey data was analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to distinguish between classroom and student characteristics. Ryan, Gheen, and Midgley's (1998) research suggests there is a relationship between the levels of help seeking in a classroom and classroom goals structures. In general, the findings suggest that the differences found in classrooms were associated with differences in the classroom goal structures. For example, classrooms where students perceived an emphasis on performance goals were associated with higher levels of help avoidance. Classrooms emphasizing learning goals were associated with lower levels of help avoidance. Ryan, Gheen, and Midgley (1998) concluded that classroom goal structures are an important component in promoting student help seeking. Specifically, classrooms emphasizing the use of learning goal structures appear to promote the most adaptive patterns of student help seeking.

A study by Ryan and Pintrich (1997) also examined the relationship between help seeking and achievement goals. Using
an original questionnaire, the study sampled 102 seventh grade students. The sample primarily consisted of white, middle-class students. The results suggest the relationship between achievement goals and help seeking is mediated by students' attitudes towards help seeking. They found that when students adopting performance goals feel intimidated by their peers or teachers they are less likely to ask for help. Interestingly, this study also found a decrease in help seeking for students adopting learning goals when they felt threatened by their peers or teachers. This research is important in that it considers the impact of the classroom environment on student goals and behavior.

Classroom Goal Structures and Avoidance of Novelty and Challenge

Another important adaptive behavior is the ability of students to engage and persist in novel and challenging tasks. Students who actively avoid novel tasks may have difficulty in school. For example, a student may try to avoid failure or embarrassment by becoming disruptive each time a new subject is discussed.

A study by Gheen and Midgley (1999) examined the relationship between classroom goal structures and students avoidance of novelty and challenge. The study's sample consisted of 325 eight-grade math students from 24 classes. Using an
original survey, Gheen and Midgley (1999) found that the students' perception of the classroom environment was related to avoiding novelty and challenge. Specifically, students who believed their classroom promoted performance goals were more likely to report avoiding novel and challenging work. In contrast, students who perceived their classrooms emphasizing learning goals reported lower levels of avoiding novel and challenging work.

Classroom Goal Structures and Disruptive Behavior

Limited research has specifically examined the relationship between disruptive behavior and motivation. Disruptive behavior can be defined as teasing, talking out of turn, getting out of one's seat, disrespecting others, violence or vandalism (Kaplan, Gheen, & Midgley, 2002). For example, a student who repeatedly speaks during lessons can be very disruptive to the classroom environment.

A current study by Kaplan, Gheen, and Midgley (2002) examined the relationship between disruptive behavior and classroom goal structures. The study included a sample of 507 ninth-grade students from 113 math classrooms. The researchers constructed an original survey based on a Likert scale format, and analyzed the data using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to distinguish between student and classroom characteristics.
Kaplan, Gheen, and Midgley's (2002) results suggest that classroom goal structures influence the level of student disruptive behavior. A negative relationship was found between disruptive behavior and students with personal learning goals who also perceived an emphasis on learning goal structures in the classroom. In other words, when students adopted learning goals and believed that the classroom supported learning goals, they were less likely to engage in disruptive behavior. In contrast, when students adopted performance goals in classrooms also promoting performance goals, there was a positive relationship with disruptive behavior. In general, the results suggest that when classrooms emphasize learning goals there tends to be less disruptive behavior however, when classrooms encourage performance goals it is more likely that students will engage in disruptive behavior.

In their discussion Kaplan, Gheen, and Midgley (2002) suggest that classrooms can use learning goal structures to reduce the level of student disruptive behavior. Furthermore, they propose that changing classroom goal structures may be a more effective intervention method than behavior modification or self-management training. They suggest that changing classroom goal structures may be more effective because it is preventative. Modifying the types of messages students receive from teachers and the classroom environment, rather than
emphasizing harsher consequences may be a more effective method of preventing and reducing disruptive behavior.

Section II: Promoting Learning Goals in the Classroom

An important aspect of achievement goal theory is that it considers how the classroom environment influences the goals students adopt. Research suggests that students' perceptions of classroom goals\(^1\) are influenced by classroom goal structures and instructional practices (Ames, 1992). Similar to classroom goal structures (e.g. classroom rule system, posted honor roles, grading system), classroom instructional practices are the goal related messages educators convey through instruction or discourse. For example, some teachers may constantly remind their students that understanding and thinking are important aspects of learning. Other teachers may emphasize the importance of earning high grades. The manner in which educators interact with students through discourse and instruction influences the goals students adopt (Ames, 1992, Turner et. al., 2002).

In Ames' (1992) review of achievement goal literature, she summarizes three main categories of classroom goal structures

---

\(^1\)Classroom goals are student perceptions of the overall goals emphasized in the classroom environment.
and instructional practices that can be utilized to promote learning goals:

1. The design of tasks and activities.
2. The role of teacher and student authority.
3. The recognition and evaluation of students.

Theoretically, these classroom strategies may be used independently or simultaneously to promote learning goals. However, Ames contends that for these strategies to be most effective they should be conceptualized as integrated parts of a systems approach.

Within achievement goal theory it is important to consider how objective classroom goal structures and instructional practices have an impact on student motivation. A useful framework for examining these influences is to consider how objective classroom goal structures and instructional practices influence the subjective student perceptions of their environment. The objective features of a classroom, such as tasks, student honor role, or written feedback on class assignments are directly observable classroom goal structures. For each of these overt features of the classroom, students will

---

2 Please see table 2 for a summary of Ames' (1992) research.
3 Classroom strategies can be defined as an integrated approach to using classroom goal structures and instructional practices to promote a learning goal environment.
subjectively interpret their environment. For example, although students may objectively receive the same feedback, each student’s perception (subjective interpretation) of the feedback they receive will vary. Achievement goal theory suggests that the way students interpret this feedback is influenced by the achievement goals they adopt.

The following section examines the implications of achievement goal theory for designing motivationally healthy classroom environments, emphasizing classroom goal structures and instructional practices that promote learning goals. Ames’ (1992) model of classroom strategies promoting learning goals will be used to establish a framework for discussing the classroom environment. Within this model, I will consider classroom goal structures and instructional practices highlighting the possible influence of students’ subjective interpretations of their learning environment on motivation.

The Design of Tasks and Activities

Tasks are a key element for establishing learning goals within the classroom. Tasks send messages to students concerning what is valued within the classroom (Ames, 1992). For example, tasks can stress student competition or cooperative learning. Each task also has corresponding objective and subjective
influence on student motivation. Outside observers can see the impact that objective structures have on student motivation, however it may be more difficult to determine the subjective influence tasks have on students.

Marshall (1994) examined the differences in student perceptions of learning and work tasks. Marshall conducted the study by interviewing 67 children from five classrooms. Following the interviews she conducted classroom observations. Marshall found that when teachers explicitly stated that the purpose of a task was to teach, students were more likely to believe that the purpose of the task was to learn. For example, teachers may specifically state, “Today we are going to learn more about multiplication. We are going to work together, and solve these problems. I want you to think hard!” In this example the teacher has specifically stated that the math problems provide an opportunity for students to learn, and emphasized the importance of students thinking through the problems.

Marshall (1994) also examined work tasks, such as repetitive worksheets. Marshall suggests that when students are asked to complete repetitive tasks, it is important to instruct them that the goal of the task is to teach them a skill. Giving students an explanation was found to increase student engagement in the task, promoting levels of engagement similar to those found with an instructional learning task. For example, “Now
that we all understand how to solve these problems on the board, I’m going to give you a worksheet that will help you understand how to use these same ideas with new problems. Take your time, work hard, and think the problems through.” Marshall also suggests that motivational messages with the intent of instructing the student to think through the activity were also found to help modify student perceptions of the task.

Marshall’s (1994) study also suggests the importance of using discourse as a means of promoting learning goals. In this study the manner in which teachers presented tasks appears to have influenced student goals. A more recent study by Turner et. al. (2002) builds on Marshall’s (1994) research suggesting that educators can present lessons to elicit a learning oriented response. Turner et. al., examined 1,092 students using surveys to gather data on student behavior and perceptions of classroom achievement goal structures. Turner also included classroom observations of teacher discourse.

The results of Turner’s et al. (2002) study suggest that teachers’ instructional practices influence the way students perceive the classroom. Messages that support student cognition and motivation were characteristic of learning goal oriented classrooms. For example: “Today we are going to learn about division. This topic can be challenging, but I know all of you can do well, if you try hard and think the problems through.”
Statements such as these help focus students on the task with a learning orientation. The teacher clearly stated what task was going to help them learn, that students were expected to think through the topic, and that with effort all students should succeed.

Turner's et. al. (2002) research suggests that teacher instructional practices may establish a foundation for different motivational environments. Although research concerning how discourse can influence classroom environments has been limited, this study suggests that affective messages may be relayed through classroom discourse. Furthermore, student perceptions of tasks maybe influenced by the manner in which teachers present tasks.

Another important aspect of tasks is the treatment of student errors. Ames (1992; Marshall, 1987; Urdan, Ryan, Anderman, Gheen, 2002) suggests that educators should use student errors as an opportunity to promote learning goals. Ames proposes that teachers, who present mistakes as a natural aspect of the learning process, foster learning goals in the classroom. For example, "Tommy does that problem work? Let's take a look at your thinking. Yes, this is good here! Ok, I can see what you did there. Oh yes here it is. Take a look at that two, could it be in the wrong place? That's a mistake a lot of students make, but you did a great job of thinking the problem through!" In
this example the teacher has focused more on the process of producing the answer rather than emphasizing the student’s mistake. The teacher also helped the student think through the problem, and modeled her thinking. Furthermore, the teacher identifies the student’s effort, and emphasizes what the student has done well.

The Role of Teacher and Student Authority

The style of authority used by educators is another key element in promoting learning goals. Generally, research suggests that teachers who are controlling, allowing students little autonomy stifle the adoption of learning goals. Whereas teachers that promote student autonomy and responsibility promote learning goals (Ames, 1992). Another consideration is how students’ subjectively perceive teacher authority. Although a teacher’s general approach to authority may be the same objectively, how individual students interpret a teacher’s actions will vary. For example, one student may find a teacher’s style reassuring, while another student may find the same teacher intimidating.

One way teachers can convey authority to students is by having clear and positive classroom expectations. Classroom expectations should be stated in positive language and posted for students. Teachers should promote classroom expectations
through the use of statements such as: “I’m sure you can do this.” And “Come to class ready to think about our papers.” Clear expectations should reduce perceived ambiguity, thus students have a clear perception of their role within the classroom (Marshal, 1987).

Similarly, a study by Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, and Midgley (2001) examined the role of teacher instructional practices and student perceptions of classroom learning and performance goals. The researchers used survey data to discriminate between four fifth grade classrooms. The survey data was then paired with qualitative observation data on each of the classrooms.

Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, and Midgley (2001) found that in classrooms promoting learning goals teachers promoted student autonomy by encouraging all students to participate. These classrooms also encouraged students to assist each other with their work. For example, one classroom allowed students to choose the order in which they completed assignments, if they wanted to work with others, and gave feedback concerning their assignments.

Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, and Midgley (2001) also suggest the importance of teachers conveying student competence. They propose that learning oriented teachers convey student competence by, "...indicating both high expectation and confidence
in students’ ability to meet those expectations... (p.53).” By emphasizing confidence in a student’s capabilities and concern for student learning, teachers can convey responsibility and autonomy to students. However, these findings suggest that concern for a student’s learning is not the same as a concern for a student’s well being. Classrooms where students perceived teacher concern for their comfort only, were associated with a lower levels of learning goals. It appears that teachers can have a concern for the students’ comfort, however, to promote learning goals teachers should emphasize the importance of student learning.

The Recognition of Students

The reward system used to recognize students is an important component in reinforcing learning goal messages and maintaining student motivation (Ames, 1992). If rewards are improperly utilized it becomes difficult for students to adopt learning goals, in an environment where espoused goals and actions are contradictory (Marshall, 1987). For example, a classroom may be highly learning oriented yet, if teachers reward students by posting an honor role in their class, this presents a contradiction in practice. This contradiction may lead students to change their original perception of the environment.
The manner in which teachers recognize students in a learning oriented environment should emphasize effort (Ames, 1992). One way to accomplish this is through the use of discourse. For example, "I can tell you were very thoughtful and worked hard to finish this letter, because your punctuation is excellent!" This statement conveys three main points: First, that the teacher recognizes the effort the student has put forth on a task. Secondly, the statement recognizes how the student’s effort has lead to improvement. Finally, it suggests that the use of effort is recognized and will be rewarded.

Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, and Midgley (2001) also examined the reward methods used by teachers. Their qualitative observations identified two reward methods used in classrooms emphasizing learning goals. One teacher focused on praising a number of individual students for specific improvements they had made. For example, teachers utilizing this model would emphasize an area of improvement for each child, every day. Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, and Midgley (2001) also observed a second type of reward method. In this classroom the teacher focused on rewarding the entire classroom. This educator would make blanket statements such as, "Most classes struggle to learn this concept, but, you’ve learned this material so fast that I can tell you’re really thinking hard!" This research suggests that either method of reinforcement could be effective provided
that instructors are consistent and present their statements appropriately.

The Evaluation of Students

Classroom evaluations have a powerful effect on how students perceive the classroom environment (Ames, 1992). Although there are a number of ways to evaluate student progress, research suggests that the emphasis teachers place on the evaluation process influences students' perceptions of their learning environment. This emphasis may be reflected in the types of messages students receive concerning the purpose of evaluation (Ames, 1992). In environments where students feel threatened by evaluations, judged, and compared to their peers, it is more likely that students will adopt performance goals. To promote learning goals, educators should emphasize that the purpose of evaluation is to promote student learning. This can be accomplished by explaining that the evaluation process is a means to understanding how much progress the student has made and how the teacher can help them develop competence (Ames, 1992).

It is important to examine classroom evaluation systems to determine the degree to which they may hinder or aid in the promotion of a learning goal environment. For example, Ames (1992) notes that public displays of individual student
materials may promote social comparison and competition. Educators should eliminate or minimize the use of factors leading to social comparison such as announcements of individual scores, charts of student progress, or displays of individual student achievement. For example, classrooms that post an honor role based on student grades are likely to foster social comparison. Maehr and Midgley (1996) suggest that evaluation systems which strive to measure effort, investment, and skill mastery, should be equally effective in promoting learning goals provided that students have a clear understanding of how improvement is measured.

Section III: Discussion and Future Directions in Achievement Goal Theory

In this section I will discuss the implications of achievement goal theory for school psychologists, considering how achievement goal theory can be used as a preventative approach to addressing motivational problems. In closing, I will offer suggestions for future research based on my review of the existing literature.

Implications for School Psychologists

Achievement goal theory is one of the most pragmatic motivational theories today, readily adapting to current
educational practices (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Current research suggests that implementing achievement goal theory at the classroom and school-wide level could act as a proactive intervention, reducing or eliminating motivational and learning problems before they occur (Kaplan, Gheen, & Midgley, 2002). Dweck (1986) argues that the use and understanding of achievement goal theory could be used as an intervention to modify maladaptive behavior through changes in motivation. As school psychologists utilize preventative approaches to better meet the needs of students, they should consider system wide and classroom interventions as a means of implementing change (Braden, DiMarino, & Good, 2001).

Using a preventative approach to the traditional student intervention process, one that reduces maladaptive behavior should be a priority for school psychologists. Taking a preventative approach to maladaptive behavior should reduce the need for student interventions, resulting in school psychologists having more time to work directly with students and educators.

A current review (Braden, DiMarino, & Good, 2001) of school psychology practices suggests that to create a preventive approach to motivational problems, school psychologists should reevaluate their role within the school system. It may be
beneficial to modify the traditional role of school psychologists moving towards a systems-level position.

Similarly, when implementing the changes required for a preventative intervention approach, school psychologists must understand the complexities of implementing systems-level changes. This requires an examination of school climate, school wide practices, and a number of other variables. Currently, there has been a limited number of studies attempting to implement achievement goal structures and practices into schools (e.g. Maehr & Midgley, 1996). Furthermore, no studies have examined the role of school psychologists in implementing achievement goal theory into current school practices. With specialized training in behavioral, psychological, and educational interventions, school psychologists would be ideal systems-level consultants.

School psychologists working as systems level consultants could help principals and teachers implement achievement goal theory into school and classroom practices. Future research concerning principals and teachers knowledge of achievement goal theory including their concerns with implementation and the barriers to implementation would be useful. Understanding these perceptions would help school psychologists recognize the complexities of systems-level interventions, and equip them with
the knowledge needed to incorporate learning goals in the classroom.

Suggestions for Future Research

Within the context of future research I will address three main areas. First, I suggest future research should continue to examine the use of motivation in educational practice. Secondly, research examining the implementation of achievement goal theory on a systems-wide level would be a valuable addition to the existing achievement goal literature and deserves further examination. Finally, I suggest that identifying specific student characteristics that influence goal adoption should be a priority for future research.

Future research should further examine the use of motivational structures in educational practice. Continued research examining how contextual goals can be utilized to influence student practices would be useful. A promising example of contextual practices is the use of discourse within the classroom. Although limited research has been conducted in this area, research should continue on how students' perceive teacher messages and how these messages influence classroom instructional practices. A further examination of discourse as a motivator, could lead to practical classroom applications of achievement goal theory.
Research on systems and classroom level interventions could be particularly useful. However, more research should be devoted to implementing systems level interventions. A more pragmatic understanding of how to integrate learning goals into the school curriculum would be beneficial to educators attempting to utilizing achievement goal theory in the classroom. In particular, an examination of the barriers and benefits of implementing learning goal structures as a preventative approach to solving motivational problems would be a welcome addition to the existing literature. As teachers and principals are the primary instigators of school structures, identifying their knowledge of achievement goal theory would be a major step in understanding the dynamics of implementing system-wide interventions. Furthermore, investigating teacher and principal perceptions concerning possible barriers to implementing learning goal structures, could prevent future difficulties when designing systems level interventions.

Continued research on the specific characteristics of students who are most susceptible to changes in classroom environment would be beneficial. Maehr and Fyans (1989) suggest that minority students, white students from lower socioeconomic levels, and students with a low-motivational pattern emerging from elementary school have the most difficulty with the transition from elementary to middle school. Current research
suggests that differences in school motivational practices from elementary to middle school could lead to inconsistencies in classroom practices, as students experience a wider variety of classroom environments. The transition from elementary to middle school may be an ideal time for school psychologists to identify students who may be at risk for motivational problems in middle school. Further research examining how student characteristics influence goal adoption would be helpful in understanding student motivational patterns, and how to educators can promote the adoption of learning goals. By implementing pro-active interventions, school psychologists may be able to help students cope with this difficult transition.
References


Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition of Goals</th>
<th>Learning Goals</th>
<th>Performance Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Success defined as</td>
<td>Improvement, progress, mastery, innovation, creativity</td>
<td>High grades, high performance compared to others, relative achievement on standardized measures, winning at all costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value placed on</td>
<td>Effort, attempting difficult tasks</td>
<td>Progress, mastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis for satisfaction</td>
<td>Progress, mastery</td>
<td>Being the best, success relative to effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task, work, performance context</td>
<td>Growth of individual potential, learning</td>
<td>Establishing performance hierarchies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for effort</td>
<td>intrinsic and personal meaning of activity</td>
<td>Demonstrating one’s worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of criteria</td>
<td>Absolute criteria, evidence of progress</td>
<td>Norms, social comparisons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors viewed as</td>
<td>Part of the growth process, informational lack of ability or worth</td>
<td>Failure, evidence of lack of ability or worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence viewed as</td>
<td>Developing, effort</td>
<td>Inherited and fixed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 This Table was adapted from Maehr & Midgley (1996) and Ames (1992).
Table 2

Classroom strategies promoting a learning orientation\(^5\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Authority</th>
<th>Evaluation/Recognition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Focus on the meaningful aspects of learning activities</td>
<td>-Focus on helping students participate in decision making</td>
<td>-Focus on individual improvement, progress, and mastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Design tasks for novelty, variety, diversity, and student interest</td>
<td>-Provide real choices where decision are based on effort, not ability evaluations</td>
<td>-Make evaluations private, not public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Design tasks that offer reasonable challenge to students</td>
<td>-Give opportunities to develop responsibility and independence</td>
<td>-Recognize student's effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Help students establish short-term goals</td>
<td>-Support development and monitoring skills.</td>
<td>-Provide opportunities for improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Support development and use of effective learning strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Encourage view of mistakes as part of the learning process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^5\)Table adapted from Ames, 1992 (pp. 267).