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Editorial

Achievement goals and achievement goal orientations in education

1. Introduction

In the past decade, the literature on achievement goals and achievement goal orientations has greatly expanded (for reviews, see [Huang, 2011](#); [Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010](#); [Kaplan & Flum, 2010](#); [Linnenbrink-Garcia, Middleton, Ciani, Easter, O'Keefe, & Zusho, 2012](#)). Researchers worldwide have developed new theoretical models on the dimensionality of achievement goals ([Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011](#)), have explored their antecedents and outcomes ([Bråten & Strømsø, 2008](#)), and have tested their stability and how they change ([Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro, & Niemivirta, 2012](#)). Applications of achievement goal theory have appeared in a variety of educational arenas including, but not limited to, primary education ([Polychroni, Hatzichristou, & Sideridis, 2012](#)), secondary education ([Sparfeldt, Buch, Wirthwein, & Rost, 2007](#)), higher education ([Bipp, Steinmayr, & Spinath, 2012](#)), teacher training ([Nitsche, Dickhäuser, Fasching, & Dresel, 2013](#)), workplace training ([Gegenfurtner, 2011](#)), and athletic coaching ([Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2009](#)). Since the pioneering work of [Dweck \(1986\)](#) and [Nicholls \(1984\)](#), achievement goals and achievement goal orientations (as well as the wider achievement motivation literature) now number among the most frequently investigated and published research topics in the leading journals of learning research. It is therefore a timely endeavor to gather the recent findings of international research teams on goals and goal orientations as a means of exploring, examining, and extending the frontiers of achievement goal theory.

Grounded in the conceptual and methodological advancements that have emerged over the past decade, this special issue contributes to the body of empirical research on theories of achievement goals, goal orientations, and goal structure. In so doing, the issue continues the tradition of special issues of the *International Journal of Educational Research* on achievement goals ([Sideridis, 2003](#)) and on motivation in general ([Gläser-Zikuda & Järvelä, 2008](#); [Sideridis, 2005](#)). This special issue also continues the tradition of special issues on approach/avoidance goals and goal orientations in related journals (e.g., [Elliot & Covington, 2001](#); [Wosnitza & Volet, 2012](#)). The present thematic collection focuses particularly on (a) achievement goals and (b) achievement goal orientations in education. In line with the broader goal literature ([Aarts & Elliot, 2012](#); [Covington, 2000](#); [Deci & Ryan, 2000](#); [Elliot & Fryer, 2008](#); [Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2012](#)), here these two constructs reflect conceptually distinct meanings. *Achievement goals* are defined as competence-based aims used to guide achievement behavior; these goals are situative and actualize in close concert with contextual affordances. *Achievement goal orientations* refer to consolidated preferences and tendencies that have stabilized as a result of repeated person-affordance interactions within the boundaries of specific achievement settings. Just as process-oriented theories on trait versus state dynamics continue to shape the broader motivation literature ([Hagenauer & Hascher, 2010](#); [Minnaert, Boekaerts, de Brabander, & Opdenakker, 2011](#)), they also continue to shape achievement goal theory. Consequently, in this special issue, we find investigations articulating the developmental trajectories of both concepts: achievement goals (and their mutable properties) as well as achievement goal orientations (and their relative stability) across a range of educational fields.

The aim of this special issue is to deepen our understanding of how goals and goal orientations contribute to educational outcomes in different contexts of formal schooling and training. The novel findings presented in the seven individual manuscripts have conceptual significance for scholars interested in goal theory. In addition, these findings have practical significance for those working to improve educational practice in the field. As a more specific overview of the special issue, the following section briefly details the methods and outcomes of each contribution.

2. Contributions to the Special Issue

The special issue commences with an analysis by [Skaalvik and Skaalvik \(2013\)](#). In their article entitled "School Goal Structure: Associations with Students' Perceptions of their Teachers as Emotionally Supportive, Academic Self-Concept,

Intrinsic Motivation, Effort, and Help Seeking Behavior”, the authors closely examine the goal structure of classrooms. The central premise is that a local goal structure on a macro level influences the achievement goal orientation of students on a micro level (see also Karabenick, 2004; Polychroni et al., 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). The analyses of Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2013) illustrate how influential the prevailing goal structure in classrooms is in shaping the student–teacher relationship; this relationship, in turn, affects students in various ways, including their motivation, emotions, and classroom behavior. The particular focus on factors situated at the macro level empirically articulates how contingent student motivation is on contextual goal structures; this research thus highlights an important but under-examined perspective in the field of goals and goal orientations in educational settings.

The article by Meier, Reindl, Grassinger, Berner, and Dresel (2013) entitled “Development of Achievement Goals across the Transition out of Secondary School” explores changes in achievement goals at a critical phase of transition for students: the transition from secondary to post-secondary education (Anderman, Austin, & Johnson, 2002; Lewalter & Krapp, 2004). Through their critical analyses, Meier et al. (2013) demonstrate how relevant context and contextual trajectories are for changes in achievement goals. In addition, the authors scrutinize the influence of self-esteem as a protective force guarding against maladaptive goal adoption. A particular strength of the manuscript is its longitudinal and interactional nature; Meier et al. (2013) succeed in investigating changes in student achievement goals after graduation from secondary school as a combined function of contextual and individual variables (see also Tuominen-Soini et al., 2012). As such, the analyses provide a unique contribution to the field of achievement goal development by demonstrating the significant role of self-esteem in preventing maladaptive goal changes, among other findings.

The article by Pulkka and Niemivirta (2013b) entitled “Predictive Relationships between Adult Students’ Achievement Goal Orientations, Course Evaluations, and Performance” shifts the scope of research from K-12 education (Meier et al., 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013) to higher education. Pulkka and Niemivirta (2013b) reveal how five types of achievement goal orientations differentially influence multiple assessments of course evaluations and student performance. Specifically, to scrutinize the effects of different instructional contexts, the authors employ a two-phase measurement procedure: evaluations and performance are first assessed after a knowledge-based lecture, and again after a learner-centered exercise. These analyses contribute to a more detailed understanding of how dispositional motivational factors account for variances in student perceptions of and preferences for different instructional affordances. The authors thus contribute to the scarce literature on achievement goal orientations and course outcomes across different pedagogical activities and assessment forms (see also Gegenfurtner, 2011; Pulkka & Niemivirta, 2013a; Senko, Belmonte, & Yakhkind, 2012).

The article by Dinger and Dickhäuser (2013) entitled “Does Implicit Theory of Intelligence Cause Achievement Goals? Evidence from an Experimental Study” is one of the few articles in the special issue to focus on the antecedents of achievement goals rather than the outcomes. Grounded in a long-standing tradition in the achievement goal literature (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Bempechat, London, & Dweck, 1991), Dinger and Dickhäuser (2013) test whether students’ implicit theory of intelligence determines their achievement goal adoption. The authors use textual prompts to manipulate beliefs about the relative stability versus malleability of intelligence (Spinath & Schöne, 2003) and succeed in highlighting the contingency upon contextual affordances of how students adopt achievement goals in higher education. The results underpin the practical relevance of endorsing an incremental theory of intelligence for the development of mastery goals. Ultimately, the findings by Dinger and Dickhäuser (2013) imply important insights into the conceptualization on achievement goal antecedents.

The article by Johnson and Kestler (2013) entitled “Achievement Goals of Traditional and Nontraditional Aged College Students: Using the 3 × 2 Achievement Goal Framework” examines how traditional and nontraditional students in American colleges adopt achievement goals. The authors’ important analyses of this phenomenon not only have practical significance for college educators and student affairs personnel, but also contribute to the emerging field of age-related differences in motivation research on (Carstensen, 2006; Gegenfurtner & Vauras, 2012; Johnson & Nussbaum, 2012). The findings of Johnson and Kestler (2013) reveal the patterns of achievement goals that traditional and nontraditional aged college students endorse; these findings, in turn, are highly indicative of the developmental trajectories of goal adoption and must be considered by scholars seeking to build a unified theory on individual processes and the contextual affordances of how achievement goals are adopted and adapted across the course of educational careers.

The article by Paulick, Retelsdorf, and Möller (2013) entitled “Motivation for Choosing Teacher Education: Associations with Teachers’ Achievement Goals and Instructional Practices” turns our attention from students in K-12 and higher education to pre-service and in-service teachers. There is a growing momentum in educational research to recognize the need to investigate not only the motivation of students but also that of teachers, largely because teacher motivation is among the critical prerequisites of successful teaching and learning processes (Butler & Shibaz, 2008; Fasching, Dresel, Dickhäuser, & Nitsche, 2010; Retelsdorf, Butler, Streblov, & Schiefele, 2010). In line with this concept, Paulick et al. (2013) transfer achievement goal theory to the field of teacher motivation as a means of identifying associations between the choice of a career in education, teacher achievement goal orientations, and instructional practices within the classroom. Their results emphasize how influential teacher motivation is for classroom instruction, which has strong practical significance for the design and reform of teacher education.

Finally, the article by Laine and Gegenfurtner (2013) entitled “Stability or Change? Effects of Time Lag and Training Length on Achievement Goal Orientations and Transfer of Training” situates achievement goal theory within the well-established context of vocational education and professional development (Minnaert et al., 2011). In a meta-analytic synthesis of research over the past 30 years, Laine and Gegenfurtner (2013) investigate associations between achievement

goal orientations and transfer of training. The authors also account for artifactual variance explained by the moderating effects of time lag and training length within these relationships. In line with previous work on motivational influences on transfer (Gegenfurtner, 2013; Segers & Gegenfurtner, 2013; Volet, 2013), the authors demonstrate the differential influences of goal orientations on transfer. Importantly, these influences remain stable and are unaffected by various time lags and training durations. With their meta-analysis, the authors contribute to the integration of the largely separate strands of literature on goal orientations in K-12 and higher education and goal orientations in organizational training and development.

The special issue concludes with two discussion papers by Hascher (2013) and Minnaert (2013). In unique ways, these two commentators confirm the importance and complexity of goals, goal orientations, and educational achievement, emphasizing the important insights derived from exploring these phenomena in different populations and education arenas. When we consider the findings articulated in the seven individual manuscripts, together with the syntheses evolved in the two discussant commentaries, it is clear that all of the contributions in the special issue play an important role in the attainment of its goal—namely, to deepen our understanding of how goals and goal orientations contribute to educational achievement in different contexts of formal schooling and training. As a result of the authors' efforts, the special issue not only has conceptual significance for goal theorists, but also has practical relevance for educational practitioners involved with a variety of educational groups.

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Andreas Gegenfurtner*
TUM School of Education, Technische Universität München,
Arcisstraße 21, Munich 80333, Germany

Gerda Hagenauer
Department of Education, University of Salzburg,
Erzabt-Klotz-Straße 1, 5020 Salzburg, Austria

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 89 289 25101;
fax: +49 89 289 25172

E-mail addresses: gerda.hagenauer@sbg.ac.at
andreas.gegenfurtner@tum.de