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# Teacher performance goal practices and elementary students' behavioral engagement: A developmental perspective

Jan N. Hughes<sup>a,\*</sup>, Wei Wu<sup>b</sup>, Stephen G. West<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Educational Psychology, Texas A&M University, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Kansas, United States

<sup>c</sup> Department of Psychology, Arizona State University, United States

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## Abstract

We investigated growth trajectories for classroom performance goal practices and for student behavioral engagement across grades 2 to 5 for 497 academically at-risk elementary students. This study is the first longitudinal investigation of performance goal practices in the early elementary years. On average, teacher use of performance goal practices increased and students' behavioral engagement declined across the four years. Using autoregressive latent trajectory (ALT) models, we examined the synchronous relations between teacher-reported performance goal practices and teacher-reported student behavioral engagement. As expected, as students move into classrooms with a new teacher with less emphasis on performance goal practices, they become more behaviorally engaged in school. Gender did not moderate these results. Implications for teacher professional development are discussed. Published by Elsevier Ltd. on behalf of Society for the Study of School Psychology.

*Keywords:* Goal structures; Teacher practices; Classroom context; Elementary students; Engagement

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## 1. Introduction

Children who enter school with low academic readiness skills are at greatly increased risk for future low academic performance and failure (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey,

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\* Corresponding author. Department of Educational Psychology, Texas A&M University, 4225 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-4225, United States. Tel.: +1 979 862 1093; fax: +1 979 862 1256.

E-mail address: [jhughes@tamu.edu](mailto:jhughes@tamu.edu) (J.N. Hughes).

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1997; Campbell, Helms, Sparling, & Ramey, 1998). Furthermore, children with lower academic readiness skills at the transition to formal schooling tend to exhibit poorer learning behaviors such as on-task and cooperative engagement behaviors in the classroom (Bodovski & Farkas, 2007). Poor learning behaviors are largely responsible for their lower growth in achievement over the elementary grades (Bodovski & Farkas, 2007; Bulotsky-Shearer, Fantuzzo, & McDermott, 2010). In an effort to prevent school failure among students with low academic readiness skills, researchers have investigated the role of aspects of the classroom context on learning behaviors and achievement in the elementary grades. This body of research has identified a number of dimensions of classroom context associated with the development of learning behaviors and academic competencies (for reviews see Brophy, 2004; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). For example, academically at-risk students in elementary classrooms characterized by affectively warm, sensitive, and responsive teacher–student interactions improve more in behavioral and academic competencies than do students in classrooms low on these dimensions (Hamre & Pianta, 2005).

The current study investigates a dimension of classroom context referred to as the classroom goal structure (see following section) and its relation to student engagement in learning. It considers how teacher use of practices associated with a performance classroom goal structure and student engagement change over the 4-year period of elementary school between grades 2 and 5. The study also considers the overall relation between the trajectories of teacher performance goal practices and student engagement as well as within-grade relations. Negative relations were expected between teachers' performance goal practices and teacher-rated student behavioral engagement in learning. Finally, the manuscript concludes with a consideration of the implications of our findings for teaching practice and professional development.

### 1.1. Goal orientation theory

One important approach to classroom goal structure (Ames, 1992; Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006) is goal orientation theory. According to this theory, individual student achievement goal orientations are considered to be a result of an individual's learning history and other dispositions such as perceived competence, as well as aspects of the current learning context, notably classroom goal structures. That is, students adopt different learning goals in different learning contexts (Shim, Ryan, & Anderson, 2008; Urdan & Midgley, 2003).

#### 1.1.1. Achievement goal orientations

Achievement goal orientations represent students' reasons or purposes for engaging in academic tasks (Lau & Nie, 2008). Researchers have identified two broad student achievement goal orientations, *mastery goal orientation* and *performance goal orientation*, with the second goal orientation being divided into two subcategories. Children with a mastery goal orientation are motivated to improve their skills, learn new things, and master new material (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006). In contrast, children with a *performance approach* goal orientation are motivated in learning situations to demonstrate high academic competence to others, to outperform others, and to receive positive recognition for their performance, and children with a *performance avoidance* goal

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