



# Motivated for teaching? Associations with school goal structure, teacher self-efficacy, job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We measured teacher perception of the school goal structure.
- A learning structure predicted lower motivation to leave the teaching profession.
- This association was mediated through higher self-efficacy and job satisfaction.
- A performance structure predicted higher motivation to leave the profession.
- This association was mediated through higher workload and emotional exhaustion.

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## ABSTRACT

We analyzed relations between teachers' perception of the school goal structure, workload, self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, and motivation to leave the teaching profession. Participants were 760 Norwegian teachers from grade 1 to 10. Data were analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. We found two main routes to motivation to leave, one from the perception of a learning goal structure via teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction, leading to lower motivation to leave, and another from the perception of a performance goal structure via increased workload and emotional exhaustion, leading to higher motivation to leave.

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## 1. Introduction

Goal theory is among the most frequently investigated research topics in journals of learning and motivation (Gegenfurtner & Hagenauer, 2013). Most research on goal theory concerns students' goal orientation. However, some researchers have focused on students' perceptions of the classroom goal structure. The classroom goal structure may be perceived as signals that students receive about what is valued in the school or in particular classrooms. Research consistently shows that students' perceptions of a strong learning goal structure are associated with a number of adaptive beliefs and responses—for instance, intrinsic motivation (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013), the feeling of belonging (Walker, 2012), positive relations with peers and teachers (Polychroni,

Hatzichristou, & Sideridis, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013), an acceptance of challenging tasks (Ames & Archer, 1988), effective learning strategies (Nolen & Haladyna, 1990), help-seeking behavior (Karabenick, 2004; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013), and effort and persistence (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013; Wolters, 2004). In comparison, a strong performance goal structure is associated with less adaptive beliefs and behaviors—for instance, less positive relationships with peers and teachers (Polychroni et al., 2012), the avoidance of help-seeking (Karabenick, 2004; Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998), lower levels of persistence (Wolters, 2004), and procrastination (Wolters, 2004).

It is not only students who receive signals about what is valued in school. Teachers also receive such signals, which may be termed the “school goal structure.” However, despite the interest in classroom goal structure in student research, few studies explore teacher perception of the school goal structure and how it is related to the teachers' experiences of their work. Much of the recent teacher research has been concerned with teacher self-efficacy, job satisfaction, stress, burnout, and attrition. This research reveals that

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high stress in the teaching profession is a global phenomenon (Chan, 2002; Johnson et al., 2005; Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). Several stressors have been identified, such as time pressure and discipline problems (Betoret, 2009; Fernet, Guay, Sénécal, & Austin, 2012; Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Kokkinos, 2007; Shernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf, & Spencer, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011a, 2015). The research also shows that stressful working conditions in school are associated with lower teacher self-efficacy, stronger symptoms of teacher burnout, and teacher attrition (Betoret, 2009; Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Fernet et al., 2012; Klassen et al., 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011a, 2016). However, there is a lack of studies exploring if and how teacher perception of the school goal structure predicts teachers' work experiences—for instance, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, experiences of time pressure, and motivation to leave the teaching profession. This study aimed to explore these relations. This is an important area of research, not only because of the high level of teacher attrition, but also because low job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion among teachers may affect the quality of education.

## 2. Theoretical framework and research review

### 2.1. Goal structure

We conceptualize teacher perception of the school goal structure as signals that teachers receive about the educational goals and values of the school, the goals and values emphasized most strongly at the schools where they teach. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011b, 2013) conceptualized the school-level goal structure as the structures and practices that influence teachers' perception of the goals and values of the school. These structures and practices include goals, norms, and values emphasized within each school, such as the way in which national and international achievement tests are used, and criteria for valuing and rewarding teachers. Additionally, in countries that have a national school curriculum, the school goal structure may be influenced by this curriculum.

The research on goal structure has focused on two goal structures: (a) learning (or mastery) and (b) performance. One may find both these goal structures in a given school. However, the goal structure most strongly emphasized may vary from one school to another. Schools with a strong *learning goal structure* emphasize understanding and improvement, recognize student effort, and consider mistakes to be a natural part of the learning process (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013). Therefore, in such environments, success is defined as improvement, and ability judgments tend to be based on goal attainment and improvement rather than on social comparison (Ames, 1992; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011b; Sproule, Wang, Morgan, McNeill, & McMorris, 2007; Urdan & Turner, 2005). In contrast, schools with a strong *performance goal structure* emphasize achievement and test scores rather than effort and improvement (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011b). In such environments, success is often conceptualized as doing better than others do, which may lead to competition, not only between students and teachers, but also between schools.

Research on teacher perception of the school goal structure and how it relates to teachers' work experiences is scarce. However, in a study of 231 Norwegian teachers in elementary school, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011b) found that teacher perception of a learning goal structure was predictive of higher value consonance, which Author defined as the degree to which teachers feel that they share the prevailing norms and values of the school. Through value consonance, a learning goal structure was also predictive of higher levels of belonging and job satisfaction. In contrast, teacher perception of a performance goal structure was associated with

lower levels of belonging. In a second study of 2569 Norwegian teachers in elementary and middle schools, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2013) and Avanzi et al. (2013) found that a learning goal structure was positively associated with teachers' engagement and job satisfaction, whereas a performance goal structure was not significantly related to these variables.

A possible interpretation of these studies is that teachers' motivation and values are in accordance with a learning goal structure for most teachers. For instance, educational values, such as helping children learn and develop, are central motives for choosing the teaching profession (Watt & Richardson, 2008). This may explain why a learning goal structure is positively associated with teachers' belonging and job satisfaction. Additionally, teachers may experience an emphasis on test results, which characterizes a performance goal structure, as stressful, partly because it may lead to social comparison and partly because student achievement cannot be fully controlled by the teacher. We therefore expected the perception of a learning goal structure to be positively associated with teacher job satisfaction. We also expected that the perception of a strong performance goal structure would be associated with higher time pressure, emotional exhaustion, lower levels of job satisfaction, and motivation to leave the teaching profession.

### 2.2. Teacher self-efficacy

In contemporary educational research, teacher self-efficacy is founded on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1997, 2006). Self-efficacy refers to peoples' beliefs about what they can do or how certain they are that they can execute certain actions (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Thus, it refers to mastery expectations and may be seen as the answer to such questions as "Can I do it?" or "How well can I do it?" (Skaalvik, 1997). Self-efficacy should be distinguished from academic self-concept, which refers to questions like "Am I good at it?" Following (Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007), p.612), we define teacher self-efficacy as "individual teachers' beliefs in their own ability to plan, organize, and carry out activities that are required to attain given educational goals."

According to Bandura (1997), the most important sources of self-efficacy are previous mastery experiences with similar types of tasks, vicarious experiences (e.g., observing other teachers mastering similar challenges), verbal persuasion (e.g., social support from colleagues and the school administration), and physiological arousal (e.g., a teacher noticing his or her heartbeat when facing a challenge). The most influential source is previous mastery experiences.

We expected that a learning goal structure at school would positively predict teacher self-efficacy and that a performance goal structure would negatively predict self-efficacy. One reason for these expectations was that, in a performance goal structure, the teachers tend to be evaluated and to evaluate themselves based on the students' performances relative to students in other classes and other schools and that not everyone can have the best student results. In comparison, in a learning goal structure, the teachers may evaluate themselves based on student improvement, and, in principle, all teachers may observe that their students are improving. However, student improvement may be masked in a performance goal structure, because improvement need not change the students' level of achievement relative to other students.

Self-efficacy is a multidimensional construct that varies with the task at hand, the situation, what aids are available, and the time allocated for the task. According to Bandura (2006), it determines how environmental opportunities and impediments are perceived and, therefore, influences peoples' goals, values, and behavior. Bandura particularly emphasizes that people with low

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