Classroom goal structures, social achievement goals, and adjustment in middle school

Sungok Serena Shim a,*, YoonJung Cho b,1, Cen Wang a,2

a Educational Psychology, Teachers’ College, 2000 W. University Ave., Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, USA
b Educational Psychology, Oklahoma State University, 426 Willard Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the mediating role of social achievement goals in the relation between classroom goal structures and academic engagement and social adjustment among 373 middle school students (52.8% female). Students’ perceptions of classroom goal structures were measured in Fall; social achievement goals and academic and social outcomes were measured in Spring. Structural equation modeling analysis confirmed that social achievement goals partially mediated the effects of perceived classroom goal structures on academic and social outcomes. Perceived classroom mastery goal structure predicted social development goals positively but social demonstration-approach goals negatively. Perceived classroom performance goal structure positively predicted social demonstration-approach and avoid goals. Subsequently, social development goals were related to adaptive outcomes (e.g., academic engagement and social satisfaction) while social demonstration-approach goals predicted negative outcomes (e.g., disruptive behaviors and social worry). Interestingly, social demonstration-avoid goals predicted high social worry but low disruptive behaviors. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Academic achievement goals have received much attention due to their strong predictive utility of students’ engagement and achievement in school (Elliot, 2005; Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Kean, 2006). However, beyond academic achievement goals, students pursue a wide array of social goals at school and researchers have increasingly acknowledged the importance of such non-academic goals for students’ adjustment at school (Anderman, 1999; Dowson & McInerney, 2001; Ryan & Shim, 2006; Urdan & Maehr, 1995).

Students approach social situations with different social achievement goals, which have significant implications for their social adjustment (Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). However, little is known about whether these different social achievement goals have implications for academic adjustment in addition to social adjustment at school. In addition, no previous studies have examined classroom antecedents related to social achievement goal adoption. This gap is surprising considering the developmental characteristics of early adolescence. Increased concerns over peer relationships and status in the peer group during this period (Berndt, 1999; Brown, 1990; Hartup, 1983) suggest that social goals may be exceedingly important for young adolescents’ academic and social adjustment at school. Furthermore, given that early adolescence marks the beginning of a downward spiral in motivation, engagement, and achievement for many adolescents (Midgley & Edelin, 1998; Roeser & Eccles, 2000; Simmons & Blyth, 1987), identifying classroom characteristics related to healthy social achievement goals can provide useful information for educators, parents, and policy makers. In sum, the present study aimed to examine classroom characteristics that are linked to students’ adoption of different social achievement goals and investigated the implications of social achievement goals for both social adjustment and academic engagement.

1.1. Conceptualization of social achievement goals

While there are various approaches to goals (Elliot & Fryer, 2008), goals are commonly defined as cognitive representations of what individuals want to accomplish and thus, direct and energize behavior (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Pintrich, 2000). In general, social goals refer to what students are focused on and...
trying to accomplish when interacting with their peers (Ryan & Shim, 2006). Among various approaches to the conceptualization of social goals, we take an achievement goal orientation approach. Individuals approach social situations with different purposes, reasons, and orientations toward social competence. Social achievement goals deal with such ultimate reasons for social engagement (Ryan & Shim, 2006).

Three types of social achievement goals, that represent distinct orientations toward social competence, have been proposed to be important to students’ adjustment and well-being (Ryan & Shim, 2006). A social development goal involves developing social competence with a primary focus on improving social relationships and social skills (e.g., gaining insights into friendship or learning how to get along with others); a social demonstration-approach goal involves demonstrating social competence with a focus on garnering positive feedback from others and gaining social prestige (e.g., being seen as “cool” or “popular”); and a social demonstration-avoid goal involves hiding the lack of social competence and avoiding negative judgments from others (e.g., not being seen as a “loser”). Previous studies have consistently shown that social achievement goals play an important role in social adjustment and psychological well-being (Horst, Finney, & Barron, 2007; Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). To date, research has not examined the effects of social achievement goals on academic engagement.

1.2. Social achievement goals and academic and social adjustment in middle school

With the focus on developing one’s competence, deepening the social relationships, and better understanding one’s friends, social development goals are likely to lead students into more satisfying connections with others (Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). These students are likely to be considerate of others’ needs and try to figure out the best thing for the relationship; consequently, the quality of their social relationship is likely to be enhanced. Similarly, a social development goal has been related to positive perceptions of social relationships, heightened social efficacy, and lower social worry (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Horst et al., 2007; Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). In addition, students with social development goals are less likely to be fettered by concerns about peers’ judgment and rejection. Thus, this goal type may help students focus on and enjoy schoolwork by freeing them from undermining thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, students with social development goals are more likely to focus on positive incidents while downplaying the significance of negative ones (Elliot et al., 2006) and such a tendency may help students maintain a positive attitude and enjoy what they learn at school. Thus, based on prior research and our rationale, we expect that social development goals will be positively related to adaptive form of academic engagement (i.e., high emotional engagement but low disruptive behavior) and adaptive social adjustment (i.e., high social satisfaction but low social worry).

Research has proposed that social demonstration-approach goals are undergirded by both dispositional need for achievement and fear of failure (Elliot & Church, 1997; Ryan & Shim, 2006) and thus, this goal type is complex in nature. With its inherent approach tendency (i.e., focusing on attaining positive outcomes), a social demonstration-approach goal seems to bring about positive social outcomes such as high social competence (Ryan & Shim, 2006), popularity and low anxious solitary behaviors (Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). However, such positive effects may be offset, as the attainment of this goal is contingent on the reaction of others. That is, students with this goal focus reported higher fear of negative evaluation of others (Horst et al., 2007) and tended to worry about their social behaviors and relationships (Ryan & Shim, 2006).

Putting forth efforts in school is increasingly viewed as “uncool” during early adolescence (Juvonen & Murdock, 1995). Thus, students with the desire to look cool and popular to peers may devalue academic tasks and show disruptive behavior as a tactic to garner socially favorable attention from their peers. Consistent with this prediction, social goals focusing on acquiring social status and popularity have been linked to negative attitudes toward school (Anderman, 1999), less effort and more disruptive behavior (Kiefer & Ryan, 2008), and maladaptive pattern of academic help seeking behaviors (Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997; Ryan & Shim, 2011). Taken together, social demonstration-approach goals seem to have both benefits and consequences. Based on prior research and our rationale, we expect that social demonstration-approach goals will show positive relationships with both adaptive and maladaptive indicators of academic engagement and social adjustment.

The avoidance nature of social demonstration-avoid goals, undergirded by negative views of one’s social competence (Ryan & Shim, 2006), is likely to lead students to withdraw from social situations. Withdrawal is the best way to avoid any potential negative outcome. In addition, such focus on negative possibilities and fear of negative judgment (Horst et al., 2007) seem to lead to maladjustment, encompassing negative perceptions of social relationships, overall loneliness, social worry, depression when faced with interpersonal stress, and anxious solitary behavior (Elliot et al., 2006; Horst et al., 2007; Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). In addition, the concern over others’ negative judgment about their lack of social competence (e.g., appearing socially awkward) and potential undesirable outcomes (e.g., being ridiculed, excluded, teased, and considered as ‘nerd’ or ‘geek’) is likely to be distracting and hence prevents students from enjoying schoolwork. Like students with social demonstration-approach goals who may disengage from academic endeavors in order to look ‘cool’, students with demonstration-avoid goals may also devalue academic tasks to avoid looking “uncool” to their peers. Therefore, we predict that social demonstration-avoid goals will be associated with low engagement as well. However, it is not clear whether this goal will be positively related to disruptive behavior given its inherent tendency to avoid failure (e.g., not appearing awkward) rather than actively seek success (e.g., looking cool). Students with social demonstration-approach goals may show disruptive behavior to impress peers with their carefree attitude toward schoolwork and audacity to cross the line and hence, attain their goal of garnering positive social attention. In contrast, students with social demonstration-avoid goals may not view disruptive behaviors as a useful strategy for hiding their lack of social competence. Such behaviors may reveal their weaknesses and thus incur more social costs than benefits. It may be safe to stay invisible in class. Taken together, we expect that a social demonstration-avoid goal will be related to maladaptive social adjustment (i.e., lower social satisfaction and higher social worry). In addition, we expect that this goal type will have a negative relation with emotional engagement but null or a negative relationship with disruptive behavior.

1.3. Classroom goal structures and social achievement goal adoption

While examining the implications of social achievement goals for young adolescents’ academic and social adjustment, we investigated whether classroom goal structures are related to students’ social achievement goal adoption. Classroom goal structures represent “goal-related messages that are made salient in the
Social-cognitive theories of motivation posit that the association between perceived classroom environment and student outcomes is mediated by students’ motivational beliefs (Ames, 1992; Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Nicholls, 1984). Even though academic goal structures are directly related to the purpose of academic work, if students consistently receive certain type of messages pertinent to how competence is defined and how success can be attained (i.e., personal progress vs. normative performance), they may pursue social achievement goals that are concordant with such messages. When social comparison, rather than personal improvement, is emphasized in the classroom, students may feel the need to prove themselves as the self is constantly on the line. Supporting our reasoning, previous studies have shown that classroom performance goal structures relate to negative affect, and self-consciousness (Kaplan & Midgley, 1999; Linnenbrink, 2005; Roeser et al., 1996). Therefore, similar to what was found in academic domain, we expect that classroom mastery goal structure will be related to social development goals while classroom performance goal structure will be related to the adoption of social demonstration-approach and avoid goals. Subsequently, these social achievement goals will mediate the adaptive effects of mastery goal structures and maladaptive effects of performance goal structures on academic engagement and social adjustment.

1.4. Aims of the study — hypotheses

The present study aimed to construe and test a model illustrating the processes, in which social achievement goals mediate the effects of classroom goal structures on middle school students’ academic engagement and social adjustment. It was hypothesized that perceived classroom goal structures (Time 1) will have direct effects on students’ academic and social adjustment (Time 2) (Hypothesis 1). Such relationships will be mediated by students’ social achievement goals (Time 2); perceived classroom goal structures will predict social achievement goals (Hypothesis 2), which in turn, predict academic and social adjustment (Hypothesis 3). Fig. 1 illustrates our conceptual model with expected direction of relationships. In the present study, we assessed both positive and negative aspects of academic and social adjustment, as the absence of the positive does not mean the presence of the negative or vice versa.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The participants were recruited from two public middle schools located in Midwestern United States. Both schools serve low-income communities (about 45% free and reduced lunch status in both schools). The two schools differ in size, region, and the grade level served (small, rural, 6–8 grades vs. large, suburban, 7–8 grades). Letters describing the project were given to all students to take home to their parents in the beginning of the Fall semester. Parents were instructed to have their children return an attached form to the teacher if they want their children to participate in the project. Of 478 students (Wave 1), 373 students also participated in Wave 2 survey, constituting the final sample, with 53.9% female and predominantly European Americans with a small percentage of ethnic minorities (14.2% African Americans, 18.5% other). We compared the students who had data at both waves and those who

![Fig. 1. The conceptual model depicting the hypothesized relations among perceived classroom goal structures, social achievement goals and social and academic adjustment. For clarity, direct paths from perceived classroom goal structure to social and academic adjustment are omitted. It is hypothesized that perceived mastery goal structure is positively related to emotional engagement and social satisfaction, but negatively related to disruptive behavior and social worry. The opposite is hypothesized for perceived performance goal structure.](image-url)
dropped out of the study after the first wave of data collection (N = 105) at Time 1. There are no differences between students in the final sample and those who did not return at Time 2 in gender or other variables measured at Time 1.

Questionnaires were administered at large group sessions during homeroom sessions. Teachers or school personnel were not present at the time of data collection. Students were told that all of their answers would be kept confidential and their participation was voluntary. Perceived classroom goal structures were measured at Time 1 (Fall) and social achievement goals and academic engagement and social adjustment indicators were measured a few months later at Time 2 (Spring).

2.2. Measures

The students reported their perceptions of classroom goal structures, social achievement goals, academic engagement, and social adjustment on a 1–5 Likert scale. Because students have several teachers in middle school, all questions were framed in the context of Math classroom. Math has been chosen due to the increasing concern for a sharp developmental decline in competence and enjoyment over time (Fredricks & Eccles, 2002). Math teachers and classmates remained unchanged across the two semesters in both schools. All measures were used and validated in prior research and the reliability coefficients with our sample were found to be adequate (see Table 1).

2.2.1. Classroom goal structures

The items are drawn from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS, Midgley et al., 2000). The mastery goal structure scale refers to students’ perception that the purpose of engaging in academic work in the classroom is to develop competence (6 items, α = .76; “In our class, how much you improve is really important”). The performance goal structure scale refers to the extent to which students’ perception that the purpose of engaging in academic work in the classroom is to demonstrate competence (3 items, α = .71; “In our class, getting good grades is the main goal”).

2.2.2. Social achievement goals

The items assessing social achievement goals were drawn from Ryan and Shim (2008). Social development goal items focus on developing social competence (7 items, α = .85; “I try to figure out what makes a good friend.”). Social demonstration-approach goal items focus on demonstrating social desirability and gaining positive judgments from others (5 items, α = .84; “It is important to me that other kids think I am popular.”). Social demonstration-avoidance goal items focus on demonstrating that one is not socially undesirable and avoiding negative judgment from others (5 items, α = .83; “When I am around other kids, I mostly just try not to goof up.”). Ryan and Shim (2006) have provided construct validity evidence that social achievement goals form distinct factors from academic achievement goals. To ensure that our data support the same conclusion, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis and compared a six-factor model (comprising three social achievement goals and three academic achievement goals) with a three-factor model (comprising three achievement goals collapsed across social and academic domains). Consistent with Ryan and Shim (2006), we found the model with six latent factors ($\chi^2_{388} = 755.16, \text{CFI} = .93, \text{RMSEA} = .05, \text{SRMR} = .05, \text{and TLI} = .93$) fit the data better than the other competing model ($\chi^2_{400} = 1960.73, \text{CFI} = .72, \text{RMSEA} = .10, \text{SRMR} = .09, \text{and TLI} = .69$).

2.2.3. Academic engagement

The items drawn from Skinner, Kindermann, and Furrrer (2009) were used to assess emotional engagement, which taps into the extent to which students are interested in and enjoy learning (5 items, α = .79; “When we work on something in class, I feel interested”). Disruptive behaviors captured the degree to which a student disrupts the class, annoys the teacher, and breaks the classroom rules. The items were drawn from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS, Midgley et al., 2000) (5 items, α = .84; “I sometimes disturb the lesson that is going on in math class.”).

2.2.4. Social adjustment

Social satisfaction taps the extent to which students are socially satisfied and do not feel lonely in class. The scale was adopted from Asher and Wheeler (1985) (5 items, α = .81; “I have some really good friends in this class.”). We assessed students’ worry regarding their social behaviors and relationships with a measure used by Ryan and Shim (2006) (4 items, α = .84; “I worry about what my friends think of me”).

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

Means, standard deviations as well as zero order correlations among variables are presented in Table 1. Instead of running a number of regression models to construct the path model using two independent samples, we opted to use structural equation modeling technique to construct one comprehensive model where the relations among all variables are estimated simultaneously. Before we could conduct structural equation modeling, we tested factor structure invariance across two middle schools by conducting multi-group confirmatory factor analysis (CFA, Byrne, 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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<td>Means, standard deviations, correlations and reliabilities among variables.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
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<td>Reliability</td>
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Note. *p < .05, **p < .01.
Item means were substituted for missing data and covariance matrices and maximum-likelihood estimation method were used to estimate model parameters. We examined three nested models: configural (the number of factors and the pattern of factor loadings are equivalent across groups), metric (the magnitude of factor loadings is equivalent across groups), and scalar invariance model (the scale intercepts are equal across groups), with each latter model representing more stringent constraints (Byrne, 2010). As Table 2 shows, each level of invariance analysis showed a satisfactory model fit and no substantial decrease in model fit in comparison with the less constrained models (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). Therefore, we ran our main analyses on the full sample.

Before we ran our main analyses, we checked two propositions that have received much attention from the researchers in the field. First, we examined the possibility that the effects of social achievement goals vary by the level of students' perceived social competence. Second, we checked whether gender moderates the effects of social goals on outcomes. To examine the potential moderating effect of student perception of social competence, we ran our SEM model with the main effect of social competence and three interaction terms with social achievement goals. None of the interaction terms was significant, with beta coefficients ranging from .03 to .15. Our finding is consistent with Ryan and Shim (2006, 2008), which found no supporting evidence. Given that only a few studies have examined such interactions, we will have to wait for more future studies to make a definitive conclusion on this issue.

To examine the potential moderating effect of gender, we ran another model testing the effects of gender × social achievement goal interaction terms. None of the interaction terms was significant, with no beta coefficients higher than .05, and the inclusion of the interaction terms did not alter the effects of other terms.

3.2. Main analyses and findings

To examine our main research question, a structural equation model was estimated using MPLUS v.5.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007). To determine the fit of the model, we consulted multiple fit indexes in addition to chi-square statistic, which is sensitive to sample size. We followed Hu and Bentler’s (1999) recommendation: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) > .90, Root Mean Square error of approximation (RMSEA) < .08, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) < .08, and Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) > .90. We estimated a structural equation model depicting direct effects of wave 1 perceived classroom goal structures on wave 2 outcome variables and indirect effects through wave 2 social achievement goals. Mediating the effects of perceived classroom goal structures, social achievement goals were hypothesized to affect academic and social outcomes. While estimating our model, we controlled for gender and school. Based on the modification indices, we freed the covariance between two perceived classroom goal structures, and between social demonstration-approach and avoid goals. The final model was a good fit to the data, \( \chi^2(937, N = 373) = 1584.52, \chi^2/df = 1.72, \text{CFI} = .91, \text{RMSEA} = .04, \text{SRMR} = .06, \text{and TLI} = .90. \)

To address the possibility that the observed effects of social achievement goals are mere reflection of those of academic achievement goals, we tested our model including academic achievement goals. This model enabled us to examine whether observed effects of social achievement goals hold after controlling for the effects of academic achievement goals. The overall model fit was acceptable, \( \chi^2(1527, N = 373) = 2498.294, \chi^2/df = 1.63, \text{CFI} = .90, \text{RMSEA} = .04, \text{SRMR} = .05, \text{and TLI} = .90. \) The relationship patterns between social achievement goals and outcome variables remained the same, except that the relationship between social development goals and emotional engagement became insignificant but remained in the same direction. As such, social achievement goals demonstrated independent effects over and beyond those of academic achievement goals.

model is graphically displayed in Fig. 2. Overall, perceived classroom goal structure and social achievement goals explained 19%, 14%, 27%, and 50% of the variance in students' emotional engagement, disruptive behavior, social satisfaction, and social worry, respectively. Further, given that some of the direct paths became smaller (as compared to the magnitude in the baseline model without mediators) but maintained significance, partial mediation was supported (e.g., the path coefficient from mastery classroom goal structure to social worry was reduced from \(-.36 \text{ to } -.17\)).

3.2.1. Perceived classroom goal structures predicting academic and social outcomes (hypothesis 1)

The standardized path coefficients indicated that perceived classroom mastery goal structure had direct positive effects on emotional engagement (beta = .31, \( p < .01 \)) and social satisfaction (beta = .26, \( p < .01 \)) but negative effects on social worry (beta = -.17, \( p < .05 \)). Perceived classroom performance goal structure had direct negative effects on emotional engagement (beta = -.23, \( p < .05 \)) and social satisfaction (beta = -.19, \( p < .05 \)) but did not have any significant direct effect on other outcome variables. Thus, our hypothesis 1 is partially confirmed.

3.2.2. Perceived classroom goal structures predicting social achievement goals (hypothesis 2)

Perceived classroom mastery goal structure positively predicted a social development goal (beta = .24, \( p < .01 \)) but negatively predicted a demonstration-approach goal (beta = -.27, \( p < .001 \)). Perceived classroom performance goal structure positively predicted both demonstration-approach (beta = .29, \( p < .001 \)) and avoid goals (beta = .26, \( p < .01 \)). Therefore, our hypothesis 2 is partially confirmed.

3.2.3. Social achievement goals predicting academic and social outcomes (hypothesis 3)

Social development goals positively predicted emotional engagement (beta = .31, \( p < .001 \)) and social satisfaction (beta = .42, \( p < .001 \)). Social demonstration-approach goals were positively related to disruptive behavior (beta = .27, \( p < .01 \)) and social worry (beta = .23, \( p < .01 \)). Social demonstration-avoid goals were negatively related to disruptive behavior (beta = -.28, \( p < .01 \)) and positively related to social worry (beta = .48, \( p < .001 \)). Therefore, our hypothesis 3 is partially confirmed.

4. Discussion

Recently, social achievement goal theory has received much attention from researchers as an important and useful tool for understanding students' social adjustment and psychological well-being (Horst et al., 2007; Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). The present study adds to the current literature by investigating the effects of social achievement goals on academic engagement in addition to social adjustment among middle school students. In addition, the current study is the first to establish the link between perceived classroom goal structure and social achievement goals.

As we predicted, social development goals were linked to higher social satisfaction. Considering the previous findings (Elliot et al., 2006; Horst et al., 2007; Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008), such effect is not surprising. However, the association between social development goals and emotional engagement is novel. The current data indicated that students with social development goals tended to enjoy learning experience at school more than their counterpart without such goals. Thus, past research and the present study demonstrate that social goals have broad implications for students' adjustment
Table 2

Results of measurement invariance tests for major measures across two schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Tests of measurement invariance</th>
<th>( \chi^2 )</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>Model comparison</th>
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<th>( \Delta df )</th>
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Note. \( \chi^2 \) = chi-square; df = degrees of freedom, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CFI = comparative fit index; \( \Delta \chi^2 \) = difference in chi-square estimates across two nested models; \( \Delta df \) = difference in degrees of freedom across two nested models; \( p \) = p-value; \( \Delta CFI \) = difference in comparative fit index across two nested models.

Fig. 2. The structural equation model depicting the mediating role of time 2 social achievement goals in the effects of time 1 perceived classroom goal structures on time 2 academic and social adjustment.
beyond social adjustment. Specifically, the social goals focusing on developing social competence and skills (social development goals), developing intimate relationship, and being prosocial and responsible promote academic engagement and adjustment among young adolescents (Kiefer & Ryan, 2008; Wentzel, 1996, 1999).

A number of studies have shown that successful social relationship (e.g., Nelson & DeBacker, 2008; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wentzel, 2009) and social skills (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997; Wentzel & Asher, 1995) are pivotal for academic motivation, learning, and achievement. Thus, social development goals may lead to academic engagement by enhancing social relationships or social skills. The tendency, inherent to social development goals, to focus on the positive incidents while downplaying the significance of negative ones (Elliot et al., 2006) may contribute to heightened engagement as well. Future research should address the exact mechanism.

As expected, social demonstration-avoid goals were related to higher social worry. Such finding is consistent with previous studies, which reported the relations between social demonstration-avoid goals and social-emotional maladjustment (Elliot et al., 2006; Horst et al., 2007; Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). Such effects are similar to the effects of performance-avoidance goals. Such social domain, which have consistently predicted negative emotional outcomes (Nelf, Hsieh, & DeJitterat, 2005; Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2009). However, performance-avoidance goals have been positively linked to disruptive behavior (Kaplan, Gheen, et al., 2002). Unlike its counterpart in academic domain, social demonstration-avoid goals seem to deter disruptive behavior. Yet, the result may not mean that this goal striving is beneficial for academic engagement. It may simply mean that this goal type leads students to stay passive and invisible in the classroom. Such intriguing results call for more future studies that examine how social and academic goal pursuits are interwoven and jointly affect students’ adjustment at school.

Social demonstration-approach goals were related to high social worry and disruptive behavior while showing null relationships with positive outcomes such as social satisfaction and engagement. This pattern is consistent with the previous studies, which found that positive association between this goal type and social worry (Ryan & Shim, 2006) but null relations with positive social relationships (Horst et al., 2007; Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Ryan & Shim, 2006). The associations between social demonstration-approach goals and undisciplined behaviors, such as high aggressive behaviors and low prosocial behaviors (Ryan & Shim, 2008; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997), have been also reported. Specifically, past research has found the link between the desire for status, which is the core element of social demonstration-approach goals, and aggressive behaviors (Dolan, 2001). As such, the extant literature suggests that the desire to climb up to the top of social pyramid triggers maladaptive social and academic behaviors, while compromising one’s own psychological well-being.

Compared to ample evidence linking classroom goal structures to students’ academic outcomes (Anderman & Wolters, 2006), few studies have examined the effects of classroom goal structures on students’ social-emotional adjustment (for an exception, see Kaplan & Midgley, 1999). However, as shown in the current study, perceived classroom goal structures have important implications for students’ social and emotional adjustment as well. Therefore, the premise that classroom environment shapes early adolescents’ motivation and engagement (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles, 2004) holds true not only in academic domain but also in social domain.

Classroom goal structures are determined by instructional practices and such practices aim to affect students’ approach to academic work. Nonetheless, the current data suggest that perceived classroom goal structures are related to students’ social achievement goals. When students perceived that their classroom focused on individual students’ progress and skill improvement, they tended to endorse social development goals and were less likely to endorse social demonstration-approach goals. In contrast, students were more likely to endorse social demonstration-approach and avoid goals when they perceived their classroom as emphasizing competition and social comparison. Maybe in such competitive classrooms, students become more sensitive to others’ judgment about their ability across various domains, such as academic, social, athletic, artistic, and etc. Related to the current findings, social interdependence theory (Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008) and other research (Levy-Tossman, Kaplan, & Assor, 2007) have shown the deleterious effects of competitive environment on interpersonal relationships among students. Adding to these existing studies, the present study suggests that classroom emphasis on competition may lead to heightened self-consciousness and foster desire to prove one’s competence (or hide lack of it) across various domains. The current findings should be replicated in future studies.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

A few limitations of the current study should be noted and may be addressed in future research. Goals are, by definition, subjective in nature and thus, self-report measure is the ideal and potentially the only way to measure them. However, classroom goal structures and students’ academic and social adjustment could use multiple data sources in addition to self-reports. Especially, the present study measured students’ perceptions of classroom goal structures, not the actual or objective goal structure. Thus, future studies with an objective measure of classroom environment through systematic observation or more complex experimental designs can provide a more rigorous test of the relationships between classroom goal structure and social goals. The current study is correlational in nature; therefore, it is important to note that causal inferences cannot be supported. Although we suggest that the environmental factors precede goals, it is possible that students’ social achievement goals color their perceptions of classroom environment. Students with different social goal orientation might derive different meanings from classroom contextual cues to fit in their own goal framework. Future studies with more time points should compare the validity of the models, estimating the opposite directions of influence between classroom goal structures and social achievement goals.

The current study measured perceived classroom goal structures at Time 1 and students’ goals and adjustment at Time 2. Having multiple time points enhances the validity of the constructs; classroom context and students’ own beliefs and behaviors can be confounded if asked to report at the same time. However, our Time 1 and 2 are too close (about 3.5 month apart) for meaningful changes in social achievement goals to occur. Future studies with more data points, spanning a longer time frame, could investigate the potential changes over time with rigor.

The present study extends the literature by demonstrating that social achievement goals can predict academic outcomes and classroom goal structures may affect social achievement goals and social outcomes. It is likely that the predictive power of social achievement goals will be particularly high during early adolescence, as students are not only exceedingly concerned about peers and fitting-in but also seeing the relationship with peers as critical to their identity development (Berndt, 1999; Brown, 1990; Hartup, 1983). Future research should examine whether such intertwined relationships between academic and social motivation and
4.2. Conclusion

Middle school teachers can hardly spare time just to talk with their students about how to interact with their peers and what might be a healthy perspective to take when students try to build friendship. The current study suggests that creating a certain type of classroom goal structure is likely to promote healthy social goals and social adjustment. Thus, it is good news as classroom goal structure based intervention can support various aspects of students’ adjustment. In other words, teachers can guide students’ academic and social achievement goals simultaneously by providing mastery goal focused classroom environment.

Many adolescents struggle academically and socially (see Eccles, 2004 for a review). The present study suggests two potential pathways through which educators can help early adolescents navigate this difficult period and adjust in school. First, the significance of motivational benefits that the provision of mastery goal-oriented classroom environment generates to students’ academic and social domains cannot be over-emphasized. Second, promoting students’ adaptive orientation toward building social competence not only enhances the quality of social life but also promotes academic engagement.

References


Austin, J. T., & Vancouver, J. F. (1996). Goal constructs in psychology: structure, influence on students’ achievement and social adjustment. In other words, teachers can guide students’ academic and social achievement goals simultaneously by providing mastery goal focused classroom environment.


