

Article

Classroom Motivational Climate in Middle School: A Descriptive Exploration of Students' Experienced and Desired Instructional Practices

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Abstract

Ensuring that students are motivated in and beyond middle school is an important educational objective. Based on achievement goal theory, research has demonstrated that the classroom motivational climate can influence students' motivation and achievement. Instructional practices that foster mastery goal structures have been proposed within the TARGET framework. However, relatively few studies have explored students' views of these, and thus, the aim of the current study was to explore which instructional practices students perceive as conducive to the classroom motivational climate. In the current qualitative study, 13 students (Grades 6 to 9) in Germany were asked about their past experiences and expressed their desires in semi-structured interviews. A deductive content analysis was utilized to identify instructional practices under the TARGET dimensions. The results provide insights into students' preferred instructional practices, which are compared with those previously suggested for fostering mastery goal structures in the Discussion. Preliminary implications for practice and future research are suggested.

Keywords: goal structures; classroom motivational climate; TARGET framework; instructional practices; achievement goal theory; social dimension; middle school

1. Introduction

Motivational factors have often been hailed as an important aspect of students' adjustment and academic success, with researchers and educators dedicating much effort to their promotion. Achievement goal theory provides a useful framework for investigating students' individual motivations and the influence of the classroom climate, with teachers fostering different classroom goal structures through their instructional practices and goal-related communication (Anderman et al., 2025). In line with this theory, when teachers place value on learning and understanding they incite a mastery classroom goal structure that promotes students' mastery goal orientations (Bardach et al., 2020). Building on this theoretical perspective, the TARGETS framework was developed to categorize instructional practices that foster goal structures along dimensions reflecting tasks, authority, recognition, grouping, evaluation, timing, and social interactions (Ames, 1992; Patrick & Kaplan, 2022). Embedded within the framework, studies have examined the impact of specific instructional practices for enhancing the classroom motivational climate, as well as students' perceptions of classroom goal structures (e.g., Emery et al., 2018). However, relatively few have considered students' preferences and desires for specific instructional



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practices (Weeldenburg et al., 2021). Thus, the aim of the current study was to explore which instructional practices students perceive as conducive to the classroom motivational climate, based on their personal experiences and expressed desires, in alignment with the TARGETS framework. The findings are discussed in relation to previously proposed practices for mastery goal structures, and preliminary implications for practice and future research are delineated.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Goal Structures

Within achievement goal theory, classroom goal structures refer to the type of achievement goal that is emphasized by prevailing instructional practices within a classroom (Anderman et al., 2025). Motivational climate is often used synonymously with classroom goal structures as it more broadly characterizes the educational setting that contributes to shaping students' motivations from a subjective perspective (Robinson, 2023). As positive outcomes are associated with mastery goal orientations, research often focuses on enhancing mastery goal structures (Lüftenegger et al., 2014). When teachers value the development of competence, including students' understanding and individual improvement, they create mastery goal structures in their classrooms (Bardach et al., 2020). In addition to promoting students' mastery goal orientations (Bardach et al., 2020), mastery goal structures are associated with positive achievement emotions (Baudoin & Galand, 2020), increased engagement (Uçar & Sungur, 2017), use of cooperative learning strategies (Daumiller et al., 2022), and academic achievement (Quintero & Wang, 2023). Given this plethora of adaptive outcomes, one prominent research agenda focuses on examining and implementing instructional practices that promote conducive mastery goal structures within classrooms.

2.2. TARGETS Framework

Examining which aspects promote mastery goal orientations, Ames (1992) delineated the TARGET framework for describing relevant motivational principles and instructional practices. Based on achievement goal theory and converging research literature, instructional practices that foster mastery goal structures within classrooms were identified and categorized according to six dimensions (Ames, 1992). These dimensions form the TARGET framework, with the acronym emphasizing the importance of *tasks* (a variety of tasks that are meaningful, are moderately challenging, and encourage active involvement); *authority* (involvement of students in active decision-making); *recognition* (appropriate incentives, rewards, and feedback); *grouping* (encouraging cooperation in heterogeneous groups); *evaluation* (focus on effort and progress instead of comparisons); and *time* (appropriate workload, as well as pace of instruction and learning; Ames, 1992). The framework was later extended to include a *social* dimension (renamed TARGETS), which captures pedagogical and affective teacher–student interactions (e.g., teaching learning strategies, showing respect, using humor; Patrick & Kaplan, 2022). Students frequently cite such interactions when describing mastery-oriented classrooms (Fejes, 2023), and teachers endorsing mastery goals tend to emphasize support, respect, relationship building, and cooperation (Patrick & Kaplan, 2022; Watt et al., 2021; Daumiller et al., 2022).

2.3. Exploring Students' Views

In line with achievement goal theory, students' experiences in class shape their perceptions of goal structures (Urdan & Kaplan, 2020), highlighting the need to explore students' views on instructional practices. Past qualitative examinations that consider students' views have mainly focused on the perception of current classroom goal structures and

goal-related messages (e.g., [Emery et al., 2018](#); [Fejes, 2023](#)). However, few have considered students' preferences and desires for specific instructional practices considered conducive to the classroom motivational climate. [Weeldenburg et al. \(2021\)](#) addressed such subjective motivational needs by conducting focus group interviews with secondary school students about their physical education classes. Motivating and demotivating practices and suggestions were categorized according to the TARGET framework, from which the authors delineated instructional practices for physical education teachers. These included providing a variety of interesting, challenging tasks [task]; providing clear instructions, support, and opportunities for choice, self-regulation, and responsibility [authority]; recognizing success and effort, engaging with individual students, and being friendly and caring [recognition]; involving students in forming heterogeneous groups, avoiding exclusion during grouping, and avoiding competition [grouping]; and setting feasible and transparent achievement standards, ensuring reliable evaluation, and facilitating individual learning processes [evaluation].

3. Current Study

The classroom motivational climate, which is shaped by instructional practices that may be subsumed under classroom goal structures, is central to students' school motivation. Guided by achievement goal theory ([Anderman et al., 2025](#)) and the TARGETS framework ([Ames, 1992](#); [Patrick & Kaplan, 2022](#)), scholars have proposed various beneficial instructional practices that foster mastery goal structures in the classroom. As the TARGETS framework provides a theory-based and empirically supported structure for organizing instructional practices for classroom goal structures ([Ames, 1992](#); [Patrick & Kaplan, 2022](#); [Lüftenegger et al., 2014, 2017](#)), it offers a suitable lens for capturing students' perspectives on such practices. However, with only a few exceptions (e.g., [Fejes, 2023](#); [Weeldenburg et al., 2021](#)), studies rarely explore students' perceptions or preferences of instructional practices to enhance the classroom motivational climate. Moreover, instructional practices related to the social dimension of fostering mastery goal structures in the classroom, particularly from students' perspectives, remain underexplored. Soliciting students' perspectives on desired instructional practices across schooling can generate new insights to guide research, highlight practices that warrant implementation, and give students agency in shaping their own learning environments. Thus, the aim of the current study was to identify instructional practices that students perceive as conducive to the classroom motivational climate across all seven TARGETS dimensions, based on students' narratives of their past experiences (i.e., practices that enhanced or undermined their motivation) and their expressed desires (i.e., ideas, suggestions, and requested changes). The study thus pursued the following sub-objectives: (a) to identify instructional practices that students report as relevant to the classroom motivational climate; (b) to allocate these practices to the TARGETS dimensions; and (c) to describe how student-reported practices extend or align with previously proposed instructional practices within the TARGETS framework.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Participants and Procedure

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, with approval obtained from the Commission for Research Impact Assessment and Ethics of the Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg (Drs.EK/2020/038). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from both the students and their parents/legal guardians. The Data Protection and Information Security Management Unit further affirmed that the study complies with the applicable data protection regulations. Middle school was chosen, as this period has been linked with declines in school motivation ([Eccles](#)

et al., 2018), as well as changes in students' achievement goal orientations and perceived goal structures (Wigfield et al., 2015). Data collected took place in spring 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby offering a unique perspective from a period in which many students generally reported reduced motivation for school (Daumiller et al., 2023). Recruitment was initially planned through schools but had to be adapted due to COVID-19 restrictions. A convenience sampling strategy was therefore employed, drawing on existing educational and community networks (e.g., contacts at schools, flyers at sports clubs) to recruit potential participants. Access to a device with internet connectivity enabling participation in video conferencing was required for participation. Students were eligible to participate if they attended Grades 6 to 9 in Germany, with purposeful inclusion of students with and without special educational needs across various school types. These criteria were selected intentionally to obtain a heterogeneous sample reflecting the current student population in Germany, ensuring that diverse perspectives were included. Students' academic achievement outcomes (e.g., grades) were not used as a selection criterion.

The final sample consisted of 13 students from across Germany, balanced across genders (7 female, 6 male) and an approximately equal distribution across Grades 6 to 9 (see Table 1). Two students had a diagnosed special educational need (i.e., hearing and visual impairment; emotional and social development). Due to policies established to prevent the spread of COVID-19, five of the students were home-schooling and the other eight attended school in limited timeframes. All participants were enrolled in inclusive school settings, while attending different school types.

Table 1. Description of students' demographic information.

Student	Sex	Grade	School Type	Special Educational Need
1	Female	6	Primary	Hearing and visual impairment
2	Male	6	Primary	None
3	Male	6	Comprehensive	Emotional and social development
4	Female	7	Comprehensive	None
5	Female	7	General	None
6	Male	7	Grammar	None
7	Male	7	Grammar	None
8	Female	8	Grammar	None
9	Female	8	Grammar	None
10	Female	8	Grammar	None
11	Male	9	Grammar	None
12	Male	9	Grammar	None
13	Female	9	Vocational	None

To contextualize the sample, the differentiated structure of the German secondary school system is briefly outlined below. While lower secondary education usually begins in Grade 6, in some federal states this grade is still part of primary education (e.g., Berlin). Lower secondary education (Grades 5–9/10; ISCED 2) is mandatory, while upper secondary education (Grades 11–13/10–12; ISCED 3) is optional. Grammar schools span lower and upper secondary education and are academically focused, leading to a university-qualifying final exam. General schools end after lower secondary education and are less academic, with students often entering trades. Comprehensive schools integrate general and grammar tracks across lower and secondary education, offering students different academic pathways within the same school. Vocational schools provide professional qualifications and vocational training in specific occupational fields and may either conclude at the lower secondary level or extend into upper secondary education. Students with special

educational needs may attend special education schools or be educated inclusively within any of the aforementioned school types.

4.2. *Semi-Structured Interview*

Students were asked to partake in a semi-structured interview, held online in spring 2021. The interviews were conducted in German and lasted 45 min on average; a few interviews were cut short because students became tired or lost concentration, whereas interviews with more talkative students lasted over an hour. The interview assessed various school-related aspects, with the current study focusing on the section devoted to exploring students' experiences and desires for instructional practices. Analyses of another section of the interview revealed that the majority of the students endorsed mastery-approach goals (only one student did not give a clear affirmation; Goagoses, 2025). The principal investigator trained four tertiary education students to conduct the interviews. The interview guide was developed in alignment with the overarching aim of the study, with particular attention paid to covering the TARGETS dimensions relevant to the classroom motivational climate. The interview guide was piloted with two school students prior to being used in the current study, which was followed by minor amendments to enhance clarity and flow.

The first part of the interview comprised open-ended questions that were developed to elicit students' experiences with instructional practices relevant to the classroom motivational climate. Students were asked to describe a specific school assignment and lesson in which they felt motivated, elaborating on why they thought it was motivating. To explore their ideas and suggestions for further conducive instructional practices, the students were asked what their teachers could do to support them in doing well at school and staying motivated, what they would like to change about their classroom or activities, general wishes they have, and what would make the lessons more interesting. Students were also asked whether there is a school subject in which they are not motivated, and what their teacher could do in those classes to motivate them. General aspects that undermine their school motivation were also explored.

The second part of the interview comprised questions pertaining to specific TARGETS dimensions that were developed based on the framework (Ames, 1992; Patrick & Kaplan, 2022) and informed by prior questionnaire-based assessments of these dimensions (Lüftenegger et al., 2017), adapted into open-ended prompts. Regarding authority, students were asked what sort of choices they can make in class, whether they want more decision-making responsibilities, whether they have the possibility to convey their interests, opinions, and suggestions to the teachers and how they feel about this, and their desired involvement in making classroom rules. Regarding recognition, students were asked what type of feedback they prefer, what feedback enhances or undermines their motivation, and what types of rewards should be given and for what. Regarding grouping, students were asked what group constellations they prefer and why, as well as about other preferences related to interactions with classmates, and reasons for seeking or avoiding help from classmates. Regarding evaluation, students were asked how teachers should assess students' understanding of the material covered in class and how teachers should respond to mistakes and failures. Regarding the social dimension, questions pertained to the desired social support from teachers, including what support students desire and why, as well as the importance of teachers giving advice, being friendly, and showing respect.

4.3. *Data Analysis*

A thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews was conducted, following the qualitative content analysis approach developed by Mayring (2022). This approach is well suited for empirical educational research and is characterized as a rule-guided and sys-

tematic analysis procedure (Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2020). A deductive category application was chosen, as the study and interview questions were guided by existing theoretical frameworks (Mayring, 2022). To begin with, all interview transcripts were read closely to provide a holistic and in-depth understanding of the included content. Following the structuring procedure, a detailed coding frame was created with initial coding categories based on the TARGETS framework (Emery et al., 2018; Weeldenburg et al., 2021). The coding frame was piloted on the interview data, and amendments were made primarily by adding sub-categories to four of the dimension categories. This addition of sub-categories allowed for thematically similar statements to be grouped, enhancing synthesis and improving the digestibility of the results. A coding guideline/manual was developed; for each (sub-)category, a definition was specified, an anchor sample quotation was extracted from the interviews, and coding rules were determined to deal with uncertainties.

The coding was conducted with the MAXQDA 22 software by a single primary coder, whereby each response or segment in the interviews was systematically coded into one of the predefined (sub-)categories. This resulted in a range of 7–64 codes per (sub-)category. As students often drew on previous experiences to formulate suggestions for desired motivational support (e.g., suggesting practices that teachers had used in the past or developing ideas opposite to previously experienced practices), a decision was taken not to separate experiences and desires in the coding. Per (sub-)category the codes were extracted and paraphrased into statements that preserved essential meaning. Statements about past experiences but without any evaluation (e.g., liking/disliking, wanting more/less) and overlapping statements were removed. The remaining statements were synthesized into concise summaries that are presented in the results section per (sub-)category. This offers a detailed account of the instructional practices that the students perceive as conducive to the motivational classroom climate and utilizing the TARGETS framework to organize the practices. The stepwise procedure enhances confirmability by grounding the results in the data and reducing potential bias. In line with established quality criteria for qualitative research (e.g., transparency, dependability, and confirmability), the rule-guided analytic procedure, detailed coding manual, and data-grounded synthesis were used to support the trustworthiness of the findings.

5. Results

According to the TARGETS framework the instructional practices were categorized according to the seven dimensions, with some sub-categories emerging during the content analysis. Instructional practices falling under the task dimension related to task content, material and procedures, participation, and teachers' affect. For authority, the instructional practices related to autonomy and classroom rules, and for recognition, they related to feedback as well as rewards and praise. The evaluation dimension encompassed type and structure and the handling of mistakes. For the grouping and social dimension, no sub-categories were formed. To enhance credibility, Table 2 presents illustrative verbatim quotations from the students for each dimension and corresponding sub-category.

Table 2. Quotations from students per TARGETS dimension.

Dimension	Student Quotations
Task	
Content	“I was motivated because the material was important to me and because it interested me, and it wasn’t difficult for me to learn it, so I was motivated.” (Student 11)

Table 2. Cont.

Dimension	Student Quotations
Task	
Material/Procedures	“But I think if teacher’s pay close attention to that, then they should see that some students don’t understand yet and then maybe they should repeat it or ask the student again after the lesson what the problem was.” (Student 9)
Participation	“Then she should not always pick the same ones, so she really only picks the girls who are sitting in the front row.” (Student 7)
Teachers’ Affect	“some teachers talk really monotonously, . . . then at some point you fall asleep and just don’t want to listen anymore (laughing). So basically, that the teachers also have a little more fun with it” (Student 12)
Authority	
Autonomy	“Most of the time it’s like, the teacher has his teaching material for the blackboard, he’s been doing it like this for 16 years and that doesn’t change. And if you could have a little bit of a say, like that you could help to shape the lessons. I think that would be cool.” (Student 13)
Rules	“We collect the rules, the ideas together, and then we decide which rule to take.” (Student 1)
Recognition	
Feedback	“like our physics teacher, she again sends our completed assignment, where she then added a few comments, what she corrected. I think it’s better that way, because then you can see where your own mistakes are and what you can do better next time. And that has a better learning effect . . .” (Student 9)
Rewards and Praise	“if you get a reward that you can directly hold in your hand. So, I think many students cannot do anything with grades. For them it is a printed number, that will sometime later gain importance. But if you have something that you really like, Haribo, chocolate, something awesome that can sweeten your day.” (Student 13)
Grouping	
	“Well, I think group work could be done more, because it’s always better than doing all the work on your own.” (Student 9)
Evaluation	
Type and Structure	“But I think such an interim test is sometimes very practical, because or these general learning controls, . . . because the teachers can see who is at what level, what we have to repeat again.” (Student 9)
Handling of Mistakes	“... I think they should show understand and when we’re back at school, they should explain it again in more detail . . .” (Student 4)
Time	
	“He just works with us at the same pace and not against our pace.” (Student 13)
Social	
	“And then the first thing she says, she doesn’t say “hello” or anything, she walks in and says, “Well, what was I thinking when I put the three of you in a group?”. Yeah, cool (ironic intonation) and that’s not a motivation, it’s directly like “Yes, I am watching you, waiting for you to mess up.” That’s how it felt then and then you’re directly demotivated, because you say to yourself “Yeah, I have already lost with her.”” (Student 7)

Note. Quotes were translated from German to English, aiming to retain both semantic content and syntactic structures.

5.1. Task Dimension

5.1.1. Task Content

Students noted that they felt motivated when tasks and topics were interesting ($n = 7$), fun, cool, or exciting ($n = 4$), and that they felt they were important and useful in the future ($n = 2$). Furthermore, they felt motivated when completing tasks that were easy ($n = 2$), did not require too much (additional) work ($n = 2$), were (easily) understood ($n = 3$), and for which they already had basic knowledge ($n = 2$), were good at ($n = 1$), and knew they could get a good mark ($n = 1$). For tasks and topics for which they were not motivated, they described the opposite. Furthermore, one student described that when having a new hobby, all he wants to do is learn more about this (hindering his motivation for class) yet recognizes that it is impossible to incorporate all students' hobbies into lessons. Another student described how he felt extra motivated when receiving a school task that coincided with something he was completing outside of class.

5.1.2. Materials and Procedure

Having teachers check homework and discuss it in class was seen positively by two students. Quite a few noted that teachers should make sure everyone was following, by regularly checking work and asking students if they understood ($n = 8$), explaining material again if they did not ($n = 6$) or providing additional material to assist with understanding ($n = 1$). Five students noted that it was important for teachers to check on and ask students individually, as asking the entire class could make those who did not understand reluctant to admit it openly. Three students noted the importance of teachers providing help and support. When asked whether teachers stating why a topic was important impacts their motivation, students' responses varied from not at all to very. Acknowledging that topics cannot simply be changed, students wished for teachers to design the lessons in a way to make the topics more interesting, including making these more diverse and varied ($n = 3$). Based on personal preferences, students suggested more practical work, explanatory videos, learning games, group discussions, oral work, book-based work, and worksheets with puzzles and questions; each of these suggestions was made by one to three students. The desire for more movement and outdoor activities, as well as incorporating technological equipment and tools, was noted by two students each.

5.1.3. Participation

Two students noted that teachers' active involvement of students in the lesson was motivating. They expressed that they want teachers to ask a lot of questions, and to not always pick the same students to answer. Another two students also mentioned wanting (opportunities) to show teachers what they can do and that they understand the material; one of these students added that they want to display their interest and that they are better than other students.

5.1.4. Teachers' Affect

Two students stated that they felt less motivated with teachers who speak monotonously and lack energy. One explained that they also want their teachers to be motivated and have fun, in order for them to feel like the teacher really wants to be there teaching them. Meanwhile, another student noted that a subject is not fun when they have an unmotivated teacher, but that even a boring subject can be interesting with the right teacher. A third student noted that they want teachers to care about their interests and enjoyment.

5.2. Authority Dimension

5.2.1. Autonomy

The students had differing experiences with autonomy. Some stated that they hardly get to make choices or voice their opinions, whilst others reported having the opportunity to do so with certain teachers or subjects. Nine students expressed the desire to make more decisions and have opportunities to voice their suggestions, noting how this would be cool, make class more interesting and fun, and make them feel good. Five students also voiced skepticism, noting that choices could be overwhelming, encourage the selection of easier tasks (resulting in less learning), and be difficult to implement due to curricular constraints or the sequential order of topics. One student positively recalled teachers providing a choice between assignments, and another valued being able to choose the order of topics covered over the school year. One student noted that she especially wants such choices in distance learning, and another indicated that it is critical that teachers then also implement students' choices. Having a class representative to communicate concerns and suggestions to teachers was valued, as were designated consultation days with teachers.

Students' reflections on autonomy also hinted at role distributions and power dynamics. One student noted that they do not just want frontal instruction, and that they should be involved in shaping the lessons. Another student noted that some teachers act as if only their opinion matters, whereas classes are perceived more positively when students feel they have a say, teachers show interest in their views, topics can be discussed, and all students can express their opinions. One student noted that he was so used to doing what the teacher wanted, yet when he could decide something himself and it was actually implemented, he felt empowered. Lastly, two students described that they only expressed opinions/suggestions to more relaxed and trustworthy teachers, and not to disliked or strict teachers, out of respect or fear of getting into trouble.

5.2.2. Classroom Rules

Three students stated that the school/classroom rules were decided solely by the teachers or already existed; one noted that these were sufficient and that students did not need to add further rules. Seven indicated that students were involved in deciding the rules or were able to make suggestions, albeit to differing degrees. Two students noted that it was cool deciding these together, and another stated that deciding via a student voting system was good.

5.3. Recognition Dimension

5.3.1. Feedback

Although generally hoping for good feedback, ten students emphasized that both positive and constructive feedback can be beneficial. They described that getting positive feedback feels good, as they then know they did something right, that they understood, that they can check off the topic, that they should do the same next time, and that it was worth the effort, which then provides motivation for the next task. One student noted that positive feedback may also decrease motivation, as students believe that all is well and do not need to practice anymore. Getting constructive feedback informed them that they should put in more effort and motivated them to try to improve next time. However, after having invested effort and thinking that the work was done well, negative feedback decreased motivation. Receiving short and generic feedback was not perceived as motivationally beneficial; detailed and specific feedback specifying what was done well and what was not was requested, as this helps direct students' focus. A student stated that if the task was not carried out correctly, that feedback should include individual (motivating) suggestions on how to learn or work better. Two students noted that it is important for teachers to

recognize effort and potential, and that feedback needs to be honest and timely. Four students also noted that teachers should not be rude or impolite when giving feedback, nor continuously give negative criticism and advice. One student also desired feedback at a classroom level, indicating when many students accomplished a task.

5.3.2. Rewards and Praise

The desire for rewards was different among the students; three students clearly indicated that they were not necessary, three thought praise was the only reward needed, two indicated that rewards are not needed but are nice to get, and the remaining five showed approval of rewards. Reasons against rewards included that other students might believe there was favoritism, that it is not realistic to provide rewards for all students, and that it is something for primary school. Four students mentioned that sweets or chocolates were good rewards, noting that it is good to get an immediate tangible reward. Other types of rewards included going on fieldtrips, as well as letting students play games, leave school early, use their phones, eat in class, or receive a homework exception voucher. One student suggested special activities in which students could win rewards, like a competitive quiz. Seeing others get a desired reward was also evaluated as being motivating by one student. One student expressed that rewards should not be provided for listening in class, another that they should not be tied to homework, and a third that they should not be associated with exam grades. One student suggested giving rewards after tests, specifically those which are not particularly hard or not a lot of studying was required; for these, teachers could use rewards to easily motivate students who do not normally prepare. Whole-class reward systems were also mentioned. One student positively evaluated the collection of tokens for lessons that went well, which could then later be converted into a reward for the whole class. Another was not fond of the token system for homework, noting that the class would not get a token when some students forget to do their homework, even though others invested effort.

5.4. Grouping Dimension

All thirteen students indicated that they (generally) like groupwork and/or pair work, with some explicitly stating that it should be done more. They liked working together on worksheets, questions in books, and puzzles. One student stated that she does not like holding presentations with others. Regarding constellations, one student mentioned that groups should not be too big and should include students with different competences (i.e., understanding of the topic, strengths and weaknesses), while another noted that groups should vary (i.e., not always pairing seatmates) and that occasionally students should be able to choose their own groups. Regarding dynamics, one student mentioned the importance of harmony, and another the difficulties of working with others who are not motivated or interested in the topic. Unequal work distribution was also addressed. One student noted that they enjoy groupwork in which they get to correct each other's work and make improvements, giving him the feeling of being a teacher. Another noted that she enjoys "whisper phases" in the lessons, in which students can quietly talk and help each other with their tasks.

5.5. Evaluation Dimension

5.5.1. Type and Structure

One student explained a practice whereby a student randomly gets selected to submit their classwork for grading; she was not fond of this, believing it to be disadvantageous when the topic was not yet understood despite active participation and attention, and when she was not chosen despite completing the classwork well. Another student noted that oral examinations are better suited to demonstrating knowledge, as students may perform better

due to the opportunity to interact with the teacher, do not run out of time or motivation, and receive immediate feedback. Three students also found tests good for evaluating understanding, specifically noting that it lets the teacher know where students stand and what material should be repeated. Regarding the timing, various suggestions were made, such as tests being written at the end of or halfway through each topic, and before exams. Students also stated that exams should be written after about two topics, but teachers should not cram in new material shortly beforehand. Lastly, one student appreciated that her teacher did not grade her too harshly, recognizing her good performance in class despite a weaker exam result.

5.5.2. Handling of Mistakes

The most common proposition for dealing with mistakes was that teachers should help and explain again ($n = 6$); teachers should talk with the students, clarify mistakes, look at the material together, and make sure they understand. Furthermore, teachers should try to discover why the student made the mistake (especially if it was reoccurring), and convey this information. One student suggested that teachers could encourage students to try again with the help of a classmate. Overall, it was expressed that teachers should show understanding when students make mistakes, letting them know that making mistakes is not bad, and encouraging questions so that mistakes do not continue. Four students noted that teachers should not yell or punish them, and refrain from using a disparaging tone or giving disparaging advice after identifying mistakes. The view that making mistakes is normal and part of the learning process was expressed, as was the view that the handling of mistakes should depend on students' overall participation/effort.

5.6. Time Dimension

When explaining what their teacher does to keep students motivated, one student noted that the teacher works at the students' pace. Another suggested that teachers should pay special attention to the first lesson in the year, showing the students that the topics will be interesting. Two students noted that too much work can reduce motivation, especially when the teachers take it too seriously. Incorporating breaks in the lessons was seen as important, and one student fondly described how a teacher implemented bi-weekly games to get students motivated before the second period. Two students addressed the timetable, noting that they felt more motivated when lessons were followed by subjects they looked forward to and felt unmotivated when they had a full day of subjects they dislike.

5.7. Social Dimension

Recalling a motivating lesson, three students described that these were with their favorite teacher, who they described as cool and who they had a good rapport with. Conversely, they were not happy and did not work as well when taught by teachers they disliked. Five students described decreased motivation and enjoyment when taught by teachers who were strict, stressed, unnecessarily meticulous, handed out punishments for minor misdemeanors, did not show respect to students, often shouted or snapped at students, made snarky comments, or created the impression of closely monitoring students with the intention of finding wrongdoing. Three students stated that playing games in the lessons and engaging in fun activities with the teacher were desirable. One mentioned the need for mutual respect between students and teachers. Regarding support, one student noted that she wants the teacher to intervene in student conflicts. Another noted that she only wants support concerning school, but not for personal topics (e.g., love life). Lastly, a student recalled how one teacher would give each student individual words of encouragement whilst handing out their tests; the student explained that teachers' expression of confidence in their ability to succeed was motivating.

6. Discussion

The aim of the current study was to identify instructional practices that students perceive as conducive to the classroom motivational climate across TARGETS dimensions, according to narratives of past experiences and expressed desires. Bringing students' views on instructional practices into focus can inform research agendas, highlight practices with practical relevance for teaching, and empower students as active contributors to classroom environments. While prior qualitative research has primarily focused on students' perceptions of existing classroom goal structures (e.g., [Emery et al., 2018](#); [Fejes, 2023](#)), few studies have examined students' desired instructional practices for promoting a motivational climate. An exception is [Weeldenburg et al. \(2021\)](#), who examined students' subjective motivational needs in the specific context of physical education classes. The present study extends their line of work by examining students' narratives of past experiences and desires in general classroom instruction and by explicitly including the social dimension of the TARGETS framework.

The TARGET framework has been successfully applied across world regions ([Bardach et al., 2020](#)), including in German-speaking countries ([Lüftenegger et al., 2017](#)), underscoring its suitability as a broadly applicable heuristic for organizing instructional practices related to classroom motivational climate. The current findings indicate that students' authentic accounts can also be meaningfully situated within the TARGETS framework. At the same time, the need for differentiated sub-categories within several TARGETS dimensions suggests that dimensions may be overly broad when applied to students' views. The present findings demonstrate both clear parallels to prior research and important divergences, offering student-centered insights into instructional practices within heterogeneous school experiences.

Regarding the task dimension, there was concurrence between students' suggestions and previous recommendations that tasks should be meaningful and personally relevant, entail diversity, encourage active participation of all students, and that teachers should exhibit genuine enthusiasm and enjoyment in engaging students ([Patrick & Kaplan, 2022](#)). This underscores the need for teachers to use students' personal experiences and interests to guide activities and tasks in the classroom ([Vaughn, 2020](#)), or involve students in designing their own learning activities ([Adams & Du Preez, 2022](#)). In opposition to previous suggestions for tasks to be challenging ([Patrick & Kaplan, 2022](#)), students indicated that they felt more motivated when completing easy tasks. Students may desire tasks that align with their current competences, as reflected in their repeated emphasis during the interview on the importance of understanding the content. When tasks are perceived as too difficult, students' perceived competence tends to decrease, which in turn reduces motivation ([Patall et al., 2018](#)). This perspective aligns with pedagogical approaches that emphasize providing differentiated and individualized content tailored to students' current competences and learning needs ([Lindner & Schwab, 2025](#)). Lastly, students' online learning experiences may have led to a preference for lower task difficulty, due to increased extraneous cognitive load ([Skulmowski & Xu, 2022](#)).

Regarding the authority dimension, there was concurrence that teachers should promote student autonomy by presenting students with choices ([Patrick & Kaplan, 2022](#)). However, students with less experience of autonomy were more critical about its implementation. Students also provided insights into practices they believed would enhance their autonomy (e.g., a class representative or dedicated consultation hours), which could be easily implemented by teachers. The practice of engaging students in the generation of their own classroom rules ([Patrick et al., 2001](#)) did not emerge as a clear desire from students. Concerning the recognition dimension, previous suggestions indicate that teachers should carefully consider for what (i.e., mastery, not outcomes) and when rewards are given (i.e.,

avoiding social comparisons), as well as providing genuine praise for task-related improvements and conveying positive expectations (Ames, 1992; Patrick et al., 2001). Students' affinity for personal and classroom-level rewards and praise differed, as did their opinions on what rewards should be given and when. Some responses were reminiscent of the Good Behavior Game that supports classroom management (Joslyn et al., 2020), which students might have been introduced to in primary school, but could still be implemented in middle school. The idea that feedback should be specific, value effort, and include suggestions for improvement (Patrick & Kaplan, 2022) was strongly reiterated by the students.

As the students indicated that they (generally) like working with others, the practice in providing opportunities for cooperative learning and peer interactions is supported (Daumiller et al., 2022; Ames, 1992). Students' responses underscored that groups should be heterogenous and varied (Daumiller et al., 2022; Patrick & Kaplan, 2022), and that harmony is required. Nonetheless, grouping practices were not very prominent in students' suggestions, suggesting that groupwork may be less central for mastery goal structures (Lüftenegger et al., 2017; Patrick & Kaplan, 2022). However, it is also possible that grouping practices were less salient as group activities are limited in online learning (Basar et al., 2021). Regarding their evaluation, students reported a variety of practices, and indicated that evaluations should recognize effort, assess learning progress, and provide opportunities for individual improvement, which aligns with previous suggestions (Patrick & Kaplan, 2022). The idea that teachers should recognize mistakes as part of learning was also expressed, in alignment with previous recommendations (Daumiller et al., 2022; Patrick & Kaplan, 2022). Students additionally emphasized that teachers should aim to explore why mistakes were made and find appropriate solutions. Teachers should thus ensure that their practices create a positive error climate in their classrooms (Soncini et al., 2021). Instructional practices in the time dimension included structuring lessons so that there is enough time for questions and matching time to students' needs (Patrick & Kaplan, 2022). Students also noted that they do not want too much work, that they require breaks, and that timetables are also important for their motivation. The implementation of active breaks is considered beneficial for the motivational climate (Vazou et al., 2012), as is the involvement of students in designing their own timetables (McVeety & Farren, 2020).

Focusing on the social dimension, students in the current study mentioned the motivational importance of having supportive relationships with their teachers, yet individual preferences were voiced concerning the desire for support in different areas. This aligns with previous propositions that students have differing perceptions of what constitutes a caring teacher and that a more nuanced distinction with regard to support is needed, whereby teachers can attend to academic, personal, or interpersonal concerns (Wentzel, 2022). As students are known to pursue multiple achievement goals (Bardach et al., 2023), exploring instructional practices beyond mastery goal structures can offer additional insights into the social dimension. Drawing upon students' social achievement goals, which reflect their social reasons for wanting to achieve in school, can provide a new element for motivation and engagement, which in turn requires suitable instructional practices (Goagoses et al., 2021). Lastly, the findings of this study underscore the need to combine mastery goal structures with a positive social climate in both regular and online learning environments (Goagoses et al., 2024; Olivier et al., 2024).

Limitations

The current study was conducted at a time in which measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 were still in effect, with students either being home-schooled or attending school at limited intervals. Students referred to their experiences and desires for instructional practices both in physical classrooms and online learning environments. A separate inter-

pretation for each of these settings was not possible, nor can it be ruled out that this had an impact on recalled experiences or current expressed desires. Due to the small sample size, the findings are not intended to be generalized but should rather be understood as exploratory and indicative, providing initial insights in the sense of a pilot study. Although the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, the structured coding procedure and illustrative verbatim quotations ensure transparency and strengthen confirmability, thereby supporting the overall trustworthiness of the results. Future research using creative design-based approaches may better elicit more innovative ideas beyond students' prior experiences. Lastly, students' suggestions showed variations, inconsistencies, and reflected personal preferences, and their effectiveness still needs to be determined. Hence, the instructional practices cannot simply be translated into concrete practical guidelines, but rather offer novel insights for future research on reforming classroom structures.

7. Conclusions

Although various instructional practices that enhance mastery goal structures in the classroom have been examined (Daumiller et al., 2022), students' experiences and desires have often been neglected. Drawing upon the TARGETS framework, the current study identified instructional practices that students perceive as conducive to the classroom motivational climate. Some desired instructional practices overlapped with those previously suggested and should thus receive implementation preference. However, a set of instructional practices that were previously not linked with enhancing the classroom motivational climate were also identified. While the findings of this study are not generalizable to all classrooms, students' voiced suggestions provide concrete points of reference for teachers seeking to enhance the motivational climate in middle school settings. This is particularly relevant given that teachers' endorsement of mastery goal structures is not sustained in their instructional practice over time (Daniels, 2015). Lastly, placing students' perspectives more centrally in research and practice may contribute to classroom environments that are genuinely experienced as motivationally supportive by students.

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