

# A Review of Motivational Influences of Emotions on Academic Goal Pursuit

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## Abstract

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*Academic performance has long been assumed as the baseline to measure the progress of the child both in schools as well as in life. It can be both, a source of stress and a source of relief and motivation for further actions. Yet, the educators are still inquisitive to explore the factors responsible to promote the academic achievement. This paper looks upon educational goals as the central objective of study and emphasises the role of emotions as the motivational factors to propel the academic goal pursuit of the students in the right direction. It tries to revisit the question why certain students are so motivated to pursue their goals despite challenges and difficulties whereas others find excuses and shut themselves from further growth.*

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## INTRODUCTION

As educational goals are a decisive factor for determining the academic performance and classroom behaviour of a student, the educators are always curious to unfold that why some students are motivated to achieve their academic goals while others are not. As our classrooms are always in a state of flux, it is quite difficult to locate one fixed cause for performance of the students in

classroom tasks. Yet in an attempt to explore the same, the centrality of this review is to explore the role of emotions as the impetus to further direct the actions of the learner in classroom tasks such as planning and preparing for the classroom activities in advance, or completing home assignments on time, seeking help, etc. The paper further draws the inferences about the motivational role of emotions in light of the Achievement

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Goal Theory, the Attribution Theory and the Prospect Theory, analysing the causality of the students' behaviour towards their academic goals. Furthermore, this review paper contrasts the prevalent traditional view of emotions as an outcome with contradictory interpretations of emotions as a facilitating/inhibitory factor for academic achievement of the students.

The aim is to provide implications for future studies for developing classroom interventions in this area by exploring if the emotions can be manipulated to help a learner achieve the academic goals.

This paper is based upon the review of various research papers and articles published in international and national education. The analysis also included psychology journals as well as online available literature in addition to some relevant books (both print and digital). The review also covers the research studies conducted over the last four decades on the role of emotions in education, emotions and motivation and the motivational theories individually.

### **STUDIES ON EDUCATIONAL GOALS**

The present study acknowledged the goals as described by Schutz, et al. (2001), as the determinants of achievement based on the efforts and persistence. Several scholars have also defined goals as specific to the individuals pertaining to their choice about future results on the basis of which they decide whether to

continue the task or not. Also, goals are stated as cognitive representation of an end state by Fishbach and Ferguson (2007), which governs daily choices of a person including goal selection, plan and the actions taken to achieve them.

Different types of goals including prehedonic goals, performance goals, eudaimonic goals, epistemic goals, and social goals, are also explored to understand the influence of emotional experiences on task performance. It was seen by Webb et al. (2012) that prehedonic goals are includes positively associated with active coping, distraction, and cognitive reappraisal, as those are effective in changing the current emotional experience. Similarly, social goals are a crucial part of academic life. Through education, the children not only learn the concepts of various subjects but also prepare themselves as active and productive social individuals through the daily processes of scaffolding, analysing and further directing the various social skills such as peer interaction, conflict resolution, perspective taking, self-awareness, etc., to define their daily behaviour. Similarly, eudaimonia goals are important for the happiness and well-being of the person and epistemic goals define the knowledge and justification part. Teachers, parents, educators and learners consider success to be the achievement of epistemic goals as the sole criterion of academic achievement. However, if one denies or ignores the importance

of eudaimonic and social goals, not only chasing other goals become difficult but also the joy of sustaining on the existing goals will be missing. This will further lead an individual to select another goal.

### **MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING GOALS**

Motivation is an important construct which governs the goal-appropriate action of the learner. It has been studied as an important predictor of learning in the past (Ryan and Connel, 1989; Pintrich, 2003).

Deci and Ryan (1989) assert that motivation encompasses all the aspects of activation and intention that have energy, direction, persistence and equifinality at its core. Exploring the work of Deci and Ryan (1989, 2000), one can identify that the motivational influences towards the goal depend upon the perceived reason of goal regulation by the individual. When the person views the selected goal as impersonal, it eliminates the motivation from within and the goal regulation is external. It can be said that if the predicted reason is in the environment, the goal regulation is external, which is dependent on the presence of rewards and punishment. However, if the perceived control of the achievement is within, the individual is internally motivated and the goal regulation is also intrinsic.

The paper further investigates the determining factors for achieving those goals from the perspective of 'The Attribution Theory' as proposed by Weiner (1986). The attribution theory

is an important goal theory which gives an underlying explanation of events as per their locus of causality. On the basis of this theory, the interpretation can be drawn that the ability, effort, task difficulty and luck are the main attributing factors for achievement. The internal attribution can be explained when the individual's ability and efforts are predicted as the reasons for achievement whereas the task difficulty and luck are considered as the external attributors as the cause of an outcome is beyond an individual's control. These attributed factors result in making a person to experience positive and negative emotions depending on the outcome. For example, when failure occurs while pursuing goals, it appears that the internal attribution often results in unpleasant emotions such as guilt and shame. On the other hand, their association with achievement and goal directed action elicits positive emotions like pride and joy.

This theory gave an important insight to the researchers looking for causal ascriptions of the behaviour or action of the learner on the task. As studied by Weiner and Graham (1989), the taxonomy of emotions is considered as a link between past outcomes and future behaviour, in a manner that past outcome results in emotions which is helpful in predicting future behaviour. The perceived cause of an outcome based on the attributional theoretical model includes lack of ability, perceived difficulty of the task, efforts and

luck governs how an individual establishes ones goals. This explains both the likes and dislikes of the learner towards the educational tasks. When investigated from the attributional analysis, the importance of various emotions experienced by the students in their academic life becomes more meaningful to be understood as the motivational feature shaping goal regulatory behaviour of the learner.

Another important theory explored here is 'The Achievement Goal Theory' put forward by Pintrich (2000), to explain students' academic motivation. The theory basically differentiates the inherent capacity lying within the individual when targeting goals. It identifies two types of goals— mastery goals and performance goals. Individuals with mastery goal orientation emphasises more on understanding and learning, whereas those with performance goal orientation are motivated on demonstrating one's ability or competence, often in relation to others.

### **SCHOOL CLIMATE AS THE DETERMINANT OF GOAL ACHIEVEMENT**

The classrooms offer countless occasions where the students experience different emotions including pleasant and non-pleasant ones, and the simple and complex sets. Hence, it would be unjust to discuss the regulation of academic goals without the mention of

those. Although theory gives more prominence to individual differences while considering their goal orientations and asserts that people vary in preferences to make choices. However, it has been demonstrated through recent studies that classroom context also plays a major role to decide the students' goal orientation. For example, Anderman and Patrick (2012), in an attempt to understand achievement goal theory, ability and classroom climate, have claimed that social context has an influential role on goals. Urdan et al. (1998) have also suggested that teaching practices in addition to the overall school climate, are important factors which decide whether the students select mastery or performance goals. Yet, it was agreed in a study by Bartlett, et al. (2006), while working on different matters in sports like self-confidence, anxiety, etc., that it is the presence of positive emotions such as enjoyment, satisfaction and interest experienced by a task-orientated performer during participation in the activity which keep them motivated to work. So, it can be discerned based on the past evidences from the studies that though the school environment and instructional practices are the determining factors for academic goal selection and goal pursuit, the stout existence of various emotions and their impact in daily life cannot be undermined.

## **RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EMOTIONS AND GOAL REGULATION**

Academic researchers, while trying to comprehend the various parameters to understand the engagement of students with school and learning, have found emotions as a crucial component for generating interest of the learner within learning. It is also a critical factor in deciding the persistence in a task and achievement of classroom goals; along with behavioural and cognitive components. Further to unfold the relationship between goal regulation and emotion utilising the motivational principles, first the review elaborated upon the function of emotions in education. Bagozzi et al. (1998) determine the informational and motivational function of emotions during goal pursuit. Emotions provide feedback for goal attainment through their informational role, and their motivational function is to energise goal-oriented action, leading to an individual's goal-focused behaviour. The individuals design or choose particular strategies to alter the emotional experiences associated with that goal which further strengthen or minimise the goal achievement. In the study by Milgram et al. (1992), it was seen that individuals choose distraction, instead of rumination, to reduce the negative emotional experience. Further to understand the motivational role of these emotions while studying the academic goals, a good number of evidences are produced from the literature which

suggest that goals are pursued with greater vigour when they are linked with positive effects as opposed to negative effects (Aarts, et. al, 2007; Aarts, et. al, 2008).

Numerous studies were conducted in the past highlighting the characteristics of emotions (Izard, 2009), role of emotions in education (Schutz and Lanehart, 2002), emotions and motivation separately, but the inquiry of the motivational influences of these emotions produced within the classroom processes on academic goal regulation has been very limited. Studies by Higgins (1997), Carver and Scheier (1990) suggest the presence of two different motivational systems which further produce positive and negative affects. One is the approach incentive systems and another is driven by the avoidance of threat. In the same line of enquiry, Carver and Jones (2009) suggest that when one performs well on the task with the intention to approach it and succeeds on it, it produces positive activating emotions such as joy and delight; whereas failure in the same causes negative emotions. Similarly, when one takes action in order to avoid the task would also produce positive emotions such as relief. This may explain the avoidance behaviour of the students in case of difficult tasks.

The above analysis of approach and avoidance behaviour of the learner can be understood based on their classification given by Pekrun (2011). He has distinguished the academic emotions with reference

to their performance properties and have classified them as:

- (a) Positive activating emotions, e.g., hope, pride, joy of learning and positive deactivating emotions like relief, contentment;
- (b) Negative activating emotions such as anger, anxiety, shame; and negative deactivating emotions, e.g., boredom, hopelessness.

The positive activating emotions provide the energy to motivate towards goal-oriented tasks, whereas positive deactivating emotions obstruct the motivation to persist on goal related tasks. Contrarily, negative activating emotions provide an internal push for an individual to pursue the goal-oriented tasks; and negative deactivating emotions demotivate the learner to obstruct the task behaviour. It further disengages the learner from the academic activities. It also explains that an individual devotes ones energy, time and efforts on a task, only if they believe that the outcome is achievable. Contrarily, an individual is withdrawn from the task if the outcome is unachievable or uninteresting. These predictions are in line with the analysis of attribution theory done in this review as mentioned in the previous section.

Another important theory studied here is 'The Prospect Theory', postulated by Heath et al. (1999). This theory well explains the motivation of an individual to chase a goal. It mentions that the success and failures are identified on the basis

of the reference points. These points are the goals. If an individual fails to achieve the selected reference point, the negative affects are evoked, which further develop diminished sensitivity to work towards achieving that goal. Based on his work, Heath et al. (1999) suggested setting proximal goals or subbing goals so that an individual stay motivated on that line. The same finding has been contradicted by Amir and Ariely (2008), who asserted that sub-goals result in contentment and distract attention from the main goal. Goal progress is important not only as an early indicator of goal achievement but its success also develops positive emotional experiences, which influence the further task performance. The same has been studied by Fox and Hoffman (2011), who emphasise that throughout the process of goal pursuit, the associated experiences of an individual may decide their future preferences for the task. If the experiences are positive, the individual is motivated to engage in associated or similar activities and vice-versa. As evident through the diversity of researches in education, sports and clinical disorders, our emotional experiences impact our motivation towards the goal regulation in different fields, the motivational role of emotions during goal regulation in education has been an understudied area.

### **Evidences from Neuroscience Studies on Task Approach and Motivation**

In an attempt to frame the neural pathways found to be involved in task approach and motivation system, it was found that high intensity positive affects are associated with brain regions involved in motivational processes and the behavioural approach system, such as nucleus accumbens, anterior cingulate cortex, insula and prefrontal cortex (Berridge, 2012; Harmon-Jones and Gable, 2008). Also, high intensity positive affects induce attentional narrowing, reduce cognitive flexibility, and shorten time perception to help people focus on a desired object or goal (Gable and Harmon-Jones, 2008; Price and Harmon-Jones, 2010). As discussed by Hart and Gable (2013), the cognitive narrowing caused by high intensity positive affect likely facilitate goal pursuit by excluding irrelevant perceptions and cognitions and allowing the individual to zero-in on the primed goal. Simultaneously, a high intensity positive state may provide information about the value of primed goal.

Studies have indicated that in order to follow their goals, regulation of emotions is required within a person. Illies and Judge (2005), presented a model highlighting the influences of feedback on consequent goals through an affective mechanism associated with the two behavioural motivation systems— performance feedback signalling success or failure (in

reaching the initial goal) influencing individuals' positive and negative affect, which in turn activates the behavioural approach or avoidance system. Illies and Judge (2005) also provided evidence that motivational state varies within individuals as a function of performance feedback.

### **Challenges in the Study of Emotions Towards Goal Regulation**

Also, an important concern in the study of emotions being raised here is about the possibility of studying emotions in isolation excluding the cognitive and behavioural aspects of classroom processes. In a cognitive motivational model proposed by Pekrun (1992), it is assumed that the effects of emotions on learning and achievement are mediated by a number of cognitive and motivational mechanisms. Many scholars have contributed to the cognitive evaluation model of emotions whereas a number of scholars, using the frameworks of both socio-cognitive theory (e.g., Bandura, 1991; Bandura and Cervone, 1983) and control theory (e.g., Carver and Scheier, 1990), have suggested that positive and negative affective reactions have important motivational implications during the process of goal regulation. Hence, the role of affects to stimulate the motivational systems cannot be ignored, however, when these characteristics of the affects act as facilitators or the inhibitors is an aspect yet to be explored.

### **Who Determines the Goals in Classrooms?**

How different individuals distinguish a situation determines their action which can be a coping behaviour, a distraction from the task, or performance on the task. A student who faces severe criticism or harsh remarks from the teacher, would try to escape the task and make excuses. In contrast, the one who is being praised by others would choose to make efforts towards the completion of the task. This can be explained by Higgin's work (1997). It suggests emotional experiences by the way one regulates pleasure and pain marks the promotion focus and prevention focus approach adopted by one to achieve the desired end state. In both cases, the person is motivated to attain the desired end state, however, a promotion focused individual is highly motivated towards accomplishments, aspirations, hopes, and tries to regulate the behaviour to achieve positive outcomes. As the emphasis here is upon hopes, ideals and the individual aims for rank and position in the class or grades in the tests, it is called the promotion focus approach. Contrarily, one chooses the prevention focus approach when the motivation is upon accomplishing one's responsibilities or ensuring safety as the prominence is to reduce negative results. The implications of the insight gained by Higgin's works (1997, 1998) may help the teacher to accordingly plan the learning tasks. If regular instructions such

as stay in your queue, wake up early, as well as setting clear goals and feedback charts would motivate the prevention-focused students to pursue their tasks. The role models and inspirational stories can work better with promotion-focused students. So, an insight about the approach selected by a student can help the teacher to accordingly design the incentives and appropriate classroom strategies, it would also be helpful in managing the problem behaviour of students.

The present review tried to examine the motivational influences of emotions on academic goal pursuit. Although the clinical implications of emotion and goal regulation have been thoroughly studied specifically in case of clinical depression and anxiety, still a dearth of work exploring an association of emotional and motivational principals of educational goals is seen. The analysis of goal regulatory behaviour by considering motivational dimension of emotions suggests that the feelings one encounter during various actions of goal pursuit further influences the goal persistence or change in goal. It does not simply mean that dichotomous emotions, i.e., positive and negative ones result in approach and avoidance behaviour respectively rather the emotional regulatory behaviour can help an individual trigger goal selection or sustain on the present one or may cause choosing different goals.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have discussed how the classroom processes generate different emotions and the key role of those in goal pursuit. We propose a link between emotions, motivations and goal-regulation, explaining motivation as the energy which regulates the behaviour or action of an individual and emotions as the feedback mechanism operating this energy. One may say that emotions serve to provide the facilitatory or inhibitory impetus towards goal pursuit. Further, this adaptive function of emotions is explored clarifying the activating and deactivating role of both positive and negative emotions as proposed by Pekrun (2011), determining future action of the learner. Rightly said, positive activating emotions are correlated positively with intrinsic motivation generating interest of the learner to chase the selected goal. Similarly, one can find suitable evidences to prove the validity of correlation between negative deactivating emotions with loss of motivation.

As demonstrated through the literature, the learners are motivated to select the academic goals and

choose to sustain on it, if the emotions they experience are of the activating nature regardless of the immediate classroom demands. For instance, a student loses motivation on continuously been rewarded for the achievement as she or he is overwhelmed with the contentment whereas on being challenged on some complex task, they are motivated to pursue it further as the emotion brings pride to them. An important implication of this finding is to help the educators and researchers find gaps in their interventions and design personally initiated strategies of learning.

Simultaneously, the paper also examines the role of emotions during various stages of goal regulation including goal setting, goal striving and goal progress highlighting the perspectives of future research to provide classroom implications. It can be stated that the fragmented work done till date still requires multilevel analysis considering the cognitive, emotional, motivational, and meta-cognitive processes together. As one component influences the existence of another, bringing out change at one level would also serve as the feedback for others.

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