

WHAT FACTORS PLAY A ROLE IN THE GOAL SETTING
OF HIGH SCHOOL-AGED STUDENTS?

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Fall 2004

Introduction to the Topic of Choice

This question is of particular interest to me due to my strong desire to become a high school guidance counselor. To be effective at my job, I need to have a better understanding of how my students think. I need to know what motivates them and what gives them a sense of urgency. I am attempting to learn what is important to adolescents as they complete their thought processes. I have to be able to comprehend what they seek to accomplish through the effort that they put forth. If I am able to do this, I will certainly be better prepared to fulfill the duties of my position.

The question is really asking what are all the determinants that come into play when teenagers set goals for themselves? Why do students / young people complete some tasks and not others? What is the reasoning behind the prioritizing of some goals and not others? What mental aspects come into play and how are they dealt with? Are the same thought processes used by all young people? One has to really deep dig to get a well-rounded comprehension on all the little nuances that come into consideration. I feel that by examining this question myself, I will be better prepared for the profession.

During the years that I was a teacher, I was amazed at the differences in the motivations of individual students. To some, nothing was more important than getting good grades. While to others, all they cared about was socializing with their friends. I would have many students make excuses while others just said they weren't concerned with completing the assignments. Yet, I could have a student completely unmotivated to do schoolwork, and yet be the most highly motivated athlete I had ever seen. So then it is not a matter of being simply lazy, it is a matter of what one finds to be of significance to them. If they find it to be worth the effort then the job will get done.

Some key terms to consider while reading this paper: 1) *attribution* – an internal belief about one’s successes or failures, 2) *core goal* – main goal/purpose that drives a person, 3) *disposition* – a generalized way of thinking about a task, 4) *mastery goal* – a desire to master new skills, 5) *motivation* – that which directs and sustains behavior, 6) *performance goal* – hoping to either look good in front of others or to at least not look bad in front of them, 7) *process goal* – perfecting the procedure without regard to the final product, 8) *product goal* – striving for a certain standard of performance, 9) *self-efficacy* – how well one believes that one will do at a certain task, and 10) *self-regulation* – setting standards for oneself and engaging in behaviors that accomplish such goals.

I have chosen five articles that I believe cover most of the spectrum as far as important aspects for high school students are concerned. I am starting with the one that would be considered closest to the school setting, i.e. importance of grades in the classroom. From there the articles start to move along a continuum from academic to more personal motivation. The second article is also academically based, but it is weighted toward grade point average as an indicator of success. The third article starts to make the transition from academics to successful performance in athletics.

The last two research papers try hard to explore concepts outside of the academic setting. Many facets of life will motivate each of us to strive for success. The fourth article explores the tendencies of adolescents to try to find meaningful and rewarding relationships among their peers. Feelings of social acceptance are particularly important at this stage of a person’s life. The last article researches the various motivations for youths who are considered “at-risk” and those who are not. It tries to explain why different sub-sets of teenagers have such extreme variances in their aspirations.

Ames, C. & Archer, J. (1988). Achievement goals in the classroom: Students' learning strategies and motivation processes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80 (3), 260 - 267.

This research was conducted to determine the more productive mentality to hold while one is a student. The first option considered was that of maintaining mastery goals and the second was that of holding performance goals. The sample was drawn from advanced students attending a combined junior and senior high school. The authors were concerned with the negative effect that ego may hold upon a student's academics.

Methodology

The participants were one hundred seventy-six students attending a school that required an 80th percentile ranking on the Secondary School Admission Test. The sample was composed of 91 boys and 85 girls who were all in attendance on the day of testing. They were randomly selected in groups of 4-6 from each of the core classes offered during the spring semester. Questions corresponded only to the subject matter of the class from which the pupil was drawn. The instrument that was employed for this study was a questionnaire that was broken down into six sections: goal orientation, learning strategies, task challenge, attitude toward class, causal attribution and perceived ability. The number of questions related to each section varied respectively: 19, 15, 2, 1, 10, and 1. Their responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale. This was a one-time only study, as there was no follow-up with a post-test sample.

Results

The researchers were concerned with the relation between a student's perception of their class (i.e. performance or mastery) and their own use of learning strategies. It was found that by comparing these standards, the holding of mastery skills ideologies

proved to have a much more productive result in the end. Students with this mindset were willing to accept more challenging assignments, had a better attitude toward class, and had certain beliefs about the causes of failure and success. It was even found that when students preferred a mastery skill outlook, they were able to overcome obstacles that resulted from their own lower self-concept of their perceived ability. The study also found that advanced students will vary their own usage of learning strategies dependent upon their perception of the goal emphasis of the class.

Implications

This study showed that the overall frame of mind of a student will contribute greatly to their relative success in a classroom setting. The concept of learning a skill appears to be much more important than how the skill is initially performed. If high school students could more readily accept this principle, then the level of their own success could be improved. Student motivation needs to be high and they need to be willing to accept more challenging work. If they use the proper learning strategies then the material they need to master would not seem so complex and unattainable.

However, the research also proved that it is most important that the teacher provide the right atmosphere for the group. Perception was a major factor in how each student approached a problem. If the instructor has not set up appropriate goals for the class, then that trickles down to the students and negatively affects their motivation to learn and willingness to apply new techniques.

Wentzel, K. R. (1989). Adolescent classroom goals, standards for performance, and Academic achievement: An interactionist perspective. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 81 (2), 131 – 142.

Past research has tended to focus on singular goals of motivation in the classroom. The present study looks to examine the effects of holding both social and academic goals and attributing the positive results to having pursuits that are complementary of each other. Teachers have a tendency to regard more well-rounded students in a higher position than those who appear to be less motivated. The author conducted her research at a San Francisco Bay area suburban high school.

Methodology

The sampling was drawn from grades 9-12 with a roughly even distribution of the 203 adolescent participants. The subjects were 108 female and 95 male, with 71% being White and the remaining 29% being minority ethnic groups. The students were chosen by the high school principal from ten classrooms representing various levels of student achievement. Measures were given during the regular class periods and permission was received from 85% of the students' parents. Each student responded to a Goal Questionnaire that was used to assess their perceived efforts toward 12 selected goals. Their answers were recorded on a 3-point scale (rarely, sometimes, and always). The author was interested in receiving objective responses and, thus, perceived effort was used as the index of motivational outcomes. There were also five questions related to social cognitions based upon the 12 initial goals. A four-point scale was used and students were asked to frame their responses to how they typically feel when they are in a class at school. Cumulative GPA's were collected for academic subjects only.

Results

The study found that higher GPA students tended to have a more complex combination of goals than did the other students. They were more apt to attempt to learn, achieve higher standards, please their teacher and family, always do their best, and complete work on time. It was determined that lower GPA students would usually hold singular goals and that many of those were socially-based. There was found to be no significant correlation between holding social interaction goals (such as helping others or keeping friendships) and that of attaining a higher GPA. Although, it was found that females attempted to be helpful more than males. Higher GPA students held goals that were both academically based and socially responsible.

Implications

This article explicitly states that multiple goal setting for adolescents is proven to be more productive. Thus, students need to be self-motivated to want to achieve and to want to achieve for the right reasons. Unfortunately, too many young people are concerned with social interaction aspects only. They don't seem to realize that once they are out of the classroom setting these pursuits will not serve them as well as academic goals. The higher standards that one holds while in school will translate to higher standards for oneself when out of school. Focusing on only what seems important at the moment is both short-sighted and limiting in the way of academic pursuits.

Duda, J. L. & Nicholls, J. G. (1992). Dimensions of achievement motivation in schoolwork and sport. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 84 (3), 290 – 299.

Past studies have shown that high perceived ability provides intrinsic satisfaction in athletic endeavors. New studies have been finding that task orientation is providing much the same personal reward in academic settings. The purpose of this research was to discover if there is any corresponding relationship between the two domains. The personal goals of high school students from a moderately large city in the Midwest were examined. The researchers were looking for goal-belief commonalities between the two.

Methodology

The participants were 207 adolescents comprised of 99 males and 108 females who provided informed consent. The sample was drawn from students in the 10th grade (6.3%) and in the 11th grade (93.7%) with a mean age of 15.1 years. The population was representative of the school and grade levels in terms of race with 70% being White, 22% being Black, 3% being Hispanic, 3% being Asian Americans, and 2% did not specify. Subjects were not selected based on their level of athletic participation, although 23% were currently on teams, 59% had been on an athletic team, and 18% reported having never played on an organized team.

The questionnaire was administered orally by a teacher trained by the researcher. Subjects were grouped together and they anonymously recorded their answers on computer-scored sheets. They were given 30 minutes to complete the measure. The instrument was comprised of five sections: assessments, goal orientations, beliefs about the causes of success, intrinsic satisfaction, and perceived ability. The assessment section was personal identification information and sports background. The orientation section had 21 questions each relating to classroom goals and sports goals, with no specific

subject matter or sport indicated. In the beliefs section, there were 20 open-ended questions related to both school and sport that began with “People succeed if...” With the satisfaction measure there were 8 questions each in regard to school and sport. In the ability section, there were four items that were assessed in relation to both components.

Results

This study was able to find that satisfaction and boredom in the classroom were primarily predicted by personal goal orientations. In sport, perceived ability was more likely to determine levels of satisfaction or boredom. Intrinsic satisfaction was found to be higher in those with athletic prowess. School was found to provide more opportunities for intrinsic satisfaction, regardless of perceived ability, as task orientation provided for more attainable goals. People do have encompassing theories about achievement.

Implications

Students have been found to choose activities for which they believe that they will succeed. If schools are able to increase their personal levels of confidence, they will be able to involve them in more areas of school and athletics. Hence, high school-aged youths would be more likely to attempt more advanced courses and tryout for various athletic programs. Learning a new skill and improving upon current knowledge should be stressed, not the actual level of competency at the time. If intrinsic satisfaction is raised, then the goals of high school students can vary across multiple domains.

Jarvinen, D. W. & Nicholls J. G. (1996). Adolescents' social goals, beliefs about the Causes of social success, and satisfaction in peer relations. *Developmental Psychology*, 32 (3), 435 – 441.

Adolescents' relationships with their peers was the focus of this study. Past research has been based on adults and elementary students, so this is considered an exploratory experiment. One previous study of teenagers was done by Ford (1982), however none of the previous studies referenced were cited. The authors were contemplating two aspects of social interaction, the goals pursued by youths and the successful behaviors that were attributed to attaining them. This work was conducted at a Midwestern county high school.

Methodology

Subjects were 266 high school freshmen with an average age of 14 years. The sample was comprised of 127 males and 139 females, accounting for 96% of the entire 9th grade class. Participants were predominantly White (96%) and middle class and income levels varied from rural farms to professional families. The procedures and questionnaires were approved by the school's principal, guidance counselor, and area superintendent. Student involvement was voluntary and any items or sections of the instruments could be skipped.

Measures were given during normal class periods and answers were recorded on computer-readable answer sheets. Students were asked to write their names for matching purposes, but they were later coded before scoring took place. It was stressed that students could express their views and that there were no right or wrong answers. Thirty minutes was allotted for completion. Sample questions were generated from a series of 25 interviews conducted of high school students by the lead researcher.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections: social goals, beliefs about the causes of social success, social satisfaction, and sociometric status. The responses were recorded on 5-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Factor analysis using the principal-components method was employed. Any students missing data for the variables being analyzed were eliminated from that section only.

Results

This study found that there were six goals pursued by adolescents in relationships with their peers: intimacy, nurturance, dominance, leadership, popularity, and avoidance. There was an association with beliefs that sincerity and consideration of others' feelings lead to social success. Communal goals were linked to satisfaction in peer relationships. Females tended to be more satisfied with their social interactions and males ranked higher in having goals related to an agenda. The research also showed that six beliefs about behavior led to success with peers: being sincere, having status, being responsible, pretending to care, entertaining others, and being tough. Lower academic track students tended to be more distant, harsh, and less personable in orientation to peers.

Implications

For those students who realize that being socially successful means also being considerate and responsible, their personal goals will very likely affect their outward behavior toward others. If, however, they have no interest in being social with others their behavior may very well reflect that lack of personable goal setting. The vantage point from which one bases themselves will determine their relative effort level(s).

Carroll, A., Durkin, K., Hattie, J., & Houghton, S. (1997). Goal setting among adolescents: A comparison of delinquent, at-risk, and not-at-risk youth. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89 (3), 441- 450.

Studies have been done in the past examining the goals of various groups of adolescents; those being delinquent, at-risk, and not-at-risk. This research, however, was conducted to compare the three groups and discover the similarities and differences in the goals that each of them tend to hold important. Delinquents were those currently in a youth correctional facility and at-risk were those who met at least three criteria on a checklist of 12 behavioral and situational indicators. Not-at-risk youths were regular high school students. The results were used to implicate future life paths and relations.

Methodology

This study was carried out in four stages. The first of which was the selection of items to assess. A list of 75 goals was narrowed down to 51 by using 12 independent raters. An Importance of Goals Scale was created to measure interests related to educational, career, interpersonal, delinquency, freedom-autonomy, self-presentation, reputation, and physical goals. In the second phase, 230 high school students were randomly selected from four metropolitan high schools in Perth, Australia. The scale was administered during English classes and all of the schools had a low to middle socioeconomic status. The readability level was of a 9 year old and the reading ease score was that indicative of six years of schooling. A 3-point scale was used and 88% of the students in grades 8-11 returned consent forms. Ten boys and ten girls were randomly selected from each grade level and the scale took 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

The scale was narrowed down from the 43 goal items to the previously mentioned eight factors. The researchers then attempted to validate the scale by administering it to

260 adolescent boys, as they were more frequently in trouble than girls. The sample was broken down into three groups of 80 delinquent, 90 at-risk, and 90 not-at-risk youths. The median age of the first group was 16.1 years while that of the second two groups was 14.4 years of age. The scale was administered to the incarcerated youths individually and to the others either individually or in small groups of six students. This was the recommended procedure by institutional personnel. The format was the same for all.

Results

The fourth stage of the study (comparison) was responsible for determining much of the researchers' findings. MANOVA was conducted with the dependent variables being the 8 factors and the independent variable being the group assigned. Social image was found to be of less importance to the not-at-risk students. The delinquent group scored highest on the physical goals. The not-at-risk group scored lowest on the autonomy and self-presentation factors, whereas the delinquent group scored lowest on the educational and interpersonal goals. All three groups were found to be relatively similar in relation to levels of self-presentation and career. A successful scale has now been created and validated by this study.

Implications

Depending on the aspirations of individual youths, their goals may be focused accordingly. Those adolescents who set their sights on social image will have goals that are not congruent with success in academic settings. Hence, most of them find themselves placed in a facility that is not scholastically based (i.e. correctional center). For those students who set goals that are in line with academic image, they are less likely to find themselves in trouble with society and their futures look particularly favorable.

Conclusion and Analysis of the Research

Goal setting has been determined to be a critical aspect of success, both in academics and in everyday life. While many of us choose goals for ourselves that tend to be personal in nature, they may all be broken down into meeting certain criteria for the aspirations that we hold. The same is true for teenagers, as well. However, the underlying motivations may vary greatly for different subsets of society.

The researchers discussed in this paper each came to conclusions about the goals that teenagers set for themselves and how these core goals affect their behaviors and social status. Ames and Archer (1988) found that when students have the initial disposition of mastering new skills and increasing prior knowledge, they are better suited to adapt to challenging situations and accept tasks of increasing complexity. Meaning, they felt that the process was more important than the product (in relation to goals). Youths were more likely to have negative opinions of themselves if they evaluated their abilities based on performance. Hence, the selection of goals can tremendously affect both learning experiences and feelings of self-efficacy.

In response to the question being asked by this paper, the second article gives a direct connection between goals set by adolescents and their ability to accomplish them. Wentzel (1989) distinguished a strong correlation between the goal of attaining a high GPA and the possession of highly desirable behavioral characteristics. Students who set higher goals for themselves are much more likely to accomplish what they set out to do. Adolescents who are able to self-regulate their own progress through school are able to successfully attempt more tasks simultaneously. Hence, if one's self-efficacy is rather high, one is more inclined to set loftier goals and accept more challenging tasks.

Duda and Nicholls (1992) were able to differentiate the main factors involved in success at school and success at play. Goal setting is influenced tremendously by personal motivation. If one perceives satisfaction that is intrinsic, then one would set a goal accordingly. Most sport related happiness comes from one's view of ability, while academic related contentment comes from the task orientation. Teenagers set their own goals according to how they wish to feel. Attribution will affect which personal benchmarks that each youth will set for him or herself.

Unlike the normal motivators of high achievement in school and sport, the relevant aspects of social success and satisfaction were explored. Jarvinen and Nicholls (1996) examined what goals are set by teenagers who wish to have worthwhile relationships with their peers. It can be said that adolescents wishing to make friends are more likely to be considerate and socially responsible. That means that their behavior will reflect such attitudes. This could lead to more openness, pleasantness, offering assistance, and/or sharing of one's time and effort. If high school students wish to feel accepted, they will behave in a manner that's in sync to the communal goals of the group.

Depending upon the social group of which you may fall, greatly varying end goals may be your focus. Carroll, Durkin, Hattie, and Houghton (1997) found there to be a wide spectrum of goals set between the two "opposites" of academic image and social image. Those teenagers who had goals that weren't academically based were slighted by society and regarded as delinquent. However, the opposite could be said for adolescents aspiring to become productive members of society. The mindset of the first group needs to be shifted so that they may have better success at finding a career path. When youths believe that being a rebel should be a personal goal, society will not concur.

Personal Opinion

As I read through these studies, I found that much of what I was told was fairly common knowledge. Goals are important to have, we must work hard to reach them, and others will judge us by our accomplishments. When I was in school the kids with the highest GPA's were the top achievers. Those who tended to act tough and get into fights were not invited into the honor society. Girls have always been considered to be more respectful and courteous. Athletics has always been a showcase for talent.

My gist being, that yes the researchers did prove certain points, but not many of them were new ones. I do have a stronger understanding of task orientation and skill mastery, but standards such as reputation and popularity will always be in the forefront of teenagers' minds. This was a relevant assignment for the field I wish to pursue, but I didn't find that I really learned a great deal to make me more successful at my job. The hardest workers have always received the greatest rewards. Negative behavior in the classroom is always going to have a negative effect on grades.

Adolescent minds are complicated enough, but when one considers all the factors going into the decisions that they make it can tend to be a bit overwhelming. I hope that by having a better understanding of the rationale behind certain decisions that I will be better able to assist my students. All cases need to be considered on an individual basis, but for the most part, generalizations do apply. Motivations are the backbone of the goals that young people set. My job will be to try to assist teenagers in refining their driving forces so that they will set goals that are productive, satisfying, and attainable. If I am able to do this, then I will consider myself as being more successful at my job. In other words, I have already determined one of the goals that I wish to set for myself.

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