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The Struggle Within: How Emotion Regulation Difficulties Affect Teenagers' Academic Motivation

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The Struggle Within: How Emotion Regulation Difficulties Affect Teenagers' Academic Motivation

Abstract

Emotion regulation, the ability to manage and control emotional responses, is a critical aspect of psychological functioning and plays a significant role in students' academic outcomes. The study explores how difficulties in managing emotions, such as frustration, anxiety, or sadness, can affect a teenager's level of motivation to engage in academic tasks. A sample of 185 adolescents, aged 15-18 years, from Bangalore city were surveyed using standardized tools, namely; Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scale (Gratz & Roemer, 2004) and the Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al., 1992–1993) to assess emotion regulation difficulties and academic motivation. Along with this, an interview with 8 teachers was conducted to understand about students' academic motivation. Statistical analysis using Pearson's correlation revealed a significant negative correlation between emotion regulation difficulties and academic motivation, suggesting that teens who struggle with emotional regulation tend to exhibit lower levels of academic motivation. Findings reveal that emotion regulation challenges may contribute to decreased academic engagement and performance, particularly in high-stress academic environments. These results emphasize the importance of emotional regulation skills in fostering academic motivation and highlight the need for interventions aimed at improving emotion regulation to enhance students' academic outcomes.

Keywords: *Emotion Regulation; Academic Motivation; Teenagers; Adolescents; Education; School*

Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial stage of development, marked by important emotional, cognitive, and social changes (Jaworska, N., & MacQueen, G., 2015). During this time, the ability to manage emotions is key to an individual's well-being, relationships, and academic success (Shengyao, Y., Xuefen, L., Jenatabadi, H.S. et al., 2024). Emotions influence how we think, feel, and act in everyday life, shaping our decisions and motivating our actions. These emotions can range from brief moments of irritation to long-lasting feelings like sadness after a loss. Emotions serve a survival function, helping us respond to challenges, recognize opportunities, and avoid danger. They guide our behavior, helping us thrive in personal and social settings, and can highlight

differences in emotional experiences and regulation, which are of great interest in psychology (Izard C. E., 2009).

6 Effective emotional control is important for maintaining psychological balance. Emotion regulation involves managing and controlling emotional experiences, responses, and expressions. Being able to regulate emotions positively impacts mental and emotional health, supporting resilience, improving relationships, and enhancing decision-making (Menefee, D. S., Ledoux, T., & Johnston, C. A., 2022). Emotional regulation is made up of several skills, such as emotional sensitivity, clarity, acceptance, impulse control, and the ability to persist toward goals despite negative emotions. When these skills are lacking, it can lead to emotional regulation difficulties, which can affect mental health and overall functioning (Young, K. S., Sandman, C. F., & Craske, M. G., 2019).

4 In the context of higher education, the well-being of students has been a major area of research in recent years. For teenagers, emotion regulation is essential to cope with the pressures of school life, including academic challenges, peer interactions, and family expectations (Chaudhry, S., Tandon, A., Shinde, S., & Bhattacharya, A., 2024). Problems with emotional regulation can lead to emotional distress, behavioral issues, and poor academic performance (Graziano, P. A., Reavis, R. D., Keane, S. P., & Calkins, S. D., 2007). Therefore, learning how to manage emotions is important for building resilience and maintaining psychological health.

3 Motivation, as described by Cuceloglu (2005) (as cited in Uyulgan, Melis & Akkuzu Güven, Nalan, 2014), includes desires, needs, impulses, and interests, all of which play a central role in human behavior. In school, motivation determines how students engage with their learning and the effort they put into their education. Motivation is linked to student engagement, a major predictor of academic success (Collie, Rebecca & Martin, Andrew., 2019). Well-motivated students are goal-oriented, socially skilled, and able to balance academic and social responsibilities (Steinmayr, Ricarda & Weidinger, Anne & Schwinger, Malte & Spinath, Birgit., 2019). Studies have shown that academic motivation is strongly associated with achievement, emphasizing its importance in learning and success (Elliot & Dweck, 2005). Research by Deci and Ryan (1985) also connects motivation to outcomes like interest, persistence, and performance. Motivation plays a particularly important role in academic success during adolescence (Elliot & Dweck, 2005).

4 Given the emotional challenges faced by teens and the importance of motivation for academic success, it is crucial to understand how difficulties in emotion regulation can impact academic motivation. Previous studies have shown positive links between emotion regulation and school performance (Gumora & Arsenio, 2002), and negative links with behavior problems and learning difficulties (Graziano et al., 2007). Despite existing research on emotion regulation and academic performance, the link between emotion regulation difficulties and academic motivation in adolescents has not been fully explored. This study will investigate how difficulties in managing emotions impact academic motivation in teens. By examining this relationship, the study aims to offer insights into how emotional regulation affects academic behavior and outcomes. This understanding could lead to interventions that help students manage their emotions and boost their academic motivation, ultimately improving their academic performance. It could also help

educators create environments that encourage student engagement and success by addressing individual needs and using both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators to enhance learning.

Method

Research Design:

14 The current study employed a mixed-method research design, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches for data collection and analysis. The quantitative component involved the use of structured questionnaires to measure key variables, while the qualitative component utilized interview from teachers to gain in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perspectives. This combination allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic by integrating numerical data with rich, descriptive insights.

26 Sample and sampling technique:

The present study used a purposive sampling method to collect data from high school students attending private schools in Bangalore city. The sample included 185 students (89 boys and 96 girls) aged 15-18 years (mean age = 17.2, SD = 0.46) from three private schools in the city. The exclusion criteria for the study included students from government schools, students with mental health concerns or those currently seeking psychological support, and students with disabilities. The study also conducted interview of 8 teachers to get in- depth understanding about students emotional and motivational aspect when it comes to their studies.

30 Measures:

1 **Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004):** It is a 36-item self-report measure that assesses individuals' typical levels of emotion regulation difficulties in general, as well as across a number of specific dimensions of emotion regulation. Individuals are asked to indicate how often the items apply to themselves, with responses ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 is "almost never (0-10%)," 2 is "sometimes (11-35%)," 3 is "about half the time (36-65%)," 4 is "most of the time (66-90%)," and 5 is "almost always (91-100%)." The DERS provides a total score (ranging from 36 to 180) that represents overall difficulties in emotion regulation. DERS score has been found to have high internal consistency (e.g., Gratz, Tull, Baruch, Bornovalova, & Lejuez, 2008; Fox et al., 2007) In addition, the DERS has demonstrated good test- retest reliability over a period of 4 to 8 weeks ($\bar{n}I = .88$; Gratz & Roemer, 2004).

29 **Academic Motivation Scale (AMS-HS 28, Vallerand et al., 1992):** It is a 28-item, 7-point Likert Type scale that was developed to assess students' self-regulatory styles in their academic activities. The AMS measures intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation as well as amotivation. According to authors, Cronbach's alphas were calculated as 0.86 for the intrinsic motivation, as 0.89 for the extrinsic motivation and 0.81 for the amotivation subscale. The reliability coefficient for 28 items was calculated as 0.89.

Interview Schedule: The interview schedule for teachers consisted of five open-ended questions aimed at exploring their perspectives on teenage students' emotional regulation and its impact on

academic motivation. The questions were designed to gather insights on common emotional challenges faced by students, the relationship between emotional regulation and academic engagement, observed behavioral patterns, and strategies that can support students in managing their emotions effectively. The structured yet flexible format allowed teachers to share their experiences and provide qualitative data for the study.

The procedure for framing the interview schedule began with identifying the research objectives, ensuring that the questions aligned with the study's focus on teenage students' emotional regulation and its impact on academic motivation. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to understand existing research, identify key themes, and address any gaps. Based on these insights, five open-ended questions were formulated to explore teachers' observations on students' emotional challenges, their influence on academic motivation, and strategies to support them. The questions were then reviewed and refined to ensure clarity, relevance, and neutrality, avoiding any leading or complex wording. To enhance the reliability of the interview schedule, it was validated by 2 psychologists and 2 education experts, who provided feedback on wording and content. A pilot interview was conducted with two teachers to assess the effectiveness of the questions, and necessary adjustments were made based on their feedback. Finally, the revised and structured interview schedule was finalized, maintaining flexibility while ensuring consistency across interviews. The interview questions are as mentioned in table 1

Table 1 showing the interview questions used in the study

Question no.	Interview questions
1.	What are the most common emotional challenges that affect students' motivation?
2.	How does emotional regulation impact students' academic performance?
3.	What strategies do you use to help students regulate their emotions and stay motivated?
4.	How does peer influence impact students' emotional regulation and motivation?
5.	What advice would you give to parents to support their child's emotional regulation and academic motivation?

Procedure:

After obtaining approval from the institutional ethics committee and the principals of the three schools, the researchers began the data collection process. Three schools were selected for the study: one from Central Bangalore, one from North Bangalore, and one from East Bangalore. The administration of the tests was conducted in a group setting. The DERS and AMS scales were distributed to all participants by the researchers, following consent from both the students and their respective principals. Prior to completing the questionnaires, all participants were provided with general guidelines and specific instructions, including information about

confidentiality. The researchers were available to address any questions or concerns from the students. Both questionnaires were administered collectively in the group setting.

For the interview a total of eight teachers from different subject areas were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring they had at least 5 years of teaching experience with teenage students. Before the interviews, teachers were informed about the study's objectives and their role in providing insights into students' emotional regulation and academic motivation. Ethical considerations were prioritized, with written informed consent obtained from all participants. Additionally, they were assured of confidentiality and reminded that their participation was entirely voluntary. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and comfortable setting within the school premises and via an online platform, depending on the participants' preference. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes, allowing teachers to provide detailed and comprehensive responses. The interviewer used probing techniques to encourage participants to elaborate on their answers and share deeper insights. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection. Additionally, field notes were taken to capture key observations and non-verbal cues, enriching the qualitative analysis.

Results and Discussion

Table 2: Sociodemographic details of the student sample

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean; SD</i>
Age	185		15	18	17.2; 0.46
Gender					
Girls	96	51.9%			
Boys	89	48.1%			
Educational stream					
Science	118	63.85			
Commerce	33	17.8%			
Arts	34	18.4%			

Table 3: Sociodemographic details of the teacher's sample

Demographic	Category	Number of Teachers	Percentage
Variable			
Gender	Male	3	37.5%

	Female	5	62.5%
28 Age Group	23-34 years	2	25%
	35-44 years	3	37.5%
	45-54 years	2	25%
	55 and above	1	12.5%
18 Years of experience	1-5 years	2	25%
	6-10 years	3	37.5%
	11-15 years	2	25%
	16 years and above	1	12.5%
Subject Taught	Mathematics	2	25%
	Science	2	25%
	English	2	25%
	Social studies	2	25%

9 The study firstly analyzed the level of emotion regulation difficulties experienced by high school students. To assess this, Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scale by Gratz K.L, and Roemer L, was used. It measures High, Moderate, and Low difficulties in emotional regulation. Looking at the results it could be seen that out of 185 students 24.3% showed low level of difficulty in emotional regulation, 27.6% experienced moderate level of difficulty in emotional regulation and 48.1% had high level of difficulty in emotional regulation. Majority of the students showed high level of emotional regulation difficulty. Adolescence is a transformative phase of life, marked by emotional, cognitive, and social changes. During this period, teenagers navigate complex experiences that shape their identity, relationships, and future aspirations (Agarwal, Shelly & Maheshwari, Abhishek & Jindal, Manisha & Rastogi, Pooja, 2020). However, the emotional challenges of adolescence often lead to struggles with managing emotions effectively, a phenomenon known as emotion dysregulation. Factors such as hormonal changes, brain development, and external pressures from academics, peers, and family dynamics contribute to the heightened vulnerability of adolescents to emotion dysregulation (Sahi, R. S., Eisenberger, N. I., & Silvers, J. A., 2023). The consequences of emotion dysregulation among teens are wide-ranging. Psychologically, it is associated with conditions such as anxiety, depression, and borderline personality disorder (Paulus, F. W., Ohmann, S., Möhler, E., Plener, P., & Popow, C.,

6 2021). Emotionally dysregulated teens often experience lower self-esteem and heightened stress, which can affect their academic motivation and performance. Socially, difficulties in managing emotions can lead to conflicts with peers, teachers, and family members, further isolating teens and perpetuating negative emotional cycles (De Berardis, D., Fornaro, M., Orsolini, L., Ventriglio, A., Vellante, F., & Di Giannantonio, M., 2020). To address emotion dysregulation, a multi-faceted approach is needed. Schools can incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL) programs that teach skills like emotional recognition, coping strategies, and mindfulness (Lawson, G. M., McKenzie, M. E., Becker, K. D., Selby, L., & Hoover, S. A., 2019). Providing access to counselors or mental health professionals is also crucial for offering support to struggling students. Parents play a vital role by fostering open communication, emotional support, and consistent discipline, while modeling healthy emotional regulation themselves. On a broader level, society should work to reduce the stigma around mental health and promote awareness of emotional well-being. Community initiatives and workshops can help equip teens with resources to build emotional resilience.

46 The study assessed the academic motivation levels of 185 high school students. Results showed that 20% had extremely high motivation, 43.2% had extremely low motivation, 12.4% had high motivation, 1.1% had moderate motivation, and 23.2% had low motivation. The majority of students exhibited low to extremely low academic motivation levels. Academic motivation is a critical factor influencing students' academic performance. Lack of motivation, or amotivation, can lead to poor academic outcomes and associated psychological issues (Yang, M., Viladrich, C., & Cruz, J., 2022). Several factors contribute to low motivation, including a belief that effort won't improve performance, competing priorities, boring lessons, and lack of clarity in teaching. These factors, as noted by Carnegie Mellon University (2019) and Dişlen (2013), can lead to disengagement and academic struggles. In addition to poor academic performance, low motivation can have emotional and social consequences. Students may experience frustration, guilt, and inadequacy, negatively impacting their mental health. Socially, they might face criticism, leading to alienation and reduced self-confidence. Over time, this disengagement can result in negative behavioral patterns such as procrastination, absenteeism, or even dropping out of school, perpetuating a cycle of underachievement. To address this issue, a collaborative approach is necessary. Schools can implement student-centered teaching methods that make lessons more engaging and relevant. Teachers should create supportive environments that encourage active participation and open communication. Mental health support is also essential, with counselors and peer programs helping to address underlying emotional challenges. Parents can play a role by offering encouragement, setting realistic goals, and balancing academics with relaxation. Finally, society needs to reduce the stigma around academic struggles and promote diverse paths to success, helping students stay engaged in their education.

38 The third objective was to assess the relationship between emotional regulation difficulty and academic motivation among PUC students.

1 ***Table 4 showing the Pearson Correlation result for relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and academic motivation among high school students***

Emotion regulation difficulty	Academic motivation
Pearson Correlation	-0.149
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.042*
N	185

**significant at the 0.05 level*

The findings from table 4 indicate a significant relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and academic motivation among PUC students, as evidenced by a Sig. (2-tailed) value of 0.042, which is lower than the alpha value of 0.05. Emotion regulation helps individuals maintain control over their behavior while staying engaged with their environment (Melnick & Hinshaw, 2000). Research has linked emotional regulation difficulties to various emotional challenges (Berking & Wupperman, 2012; Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017; Kapoor et al., 2019). Students who struggle with emotional regulation may face challenges in academics, social interactions, and conflict resolution. They may exhibit defiance, difficulty following instructions, trouble maintaining friendships, and reduced focus on tasks. On the other hand, students who manage their emotions effectively tend to perform better academically (Boekaerts, 2002). Gumora & Arsenio (2002) found that early adolescent emotion management significantly influences academic achievement, even beyond cognitive abilities. A 2013 study further confirmed a negative correlation between emotional regulation difficulties and academic performance, showing that students with greater difficulties performed worse in academics (Parwinder Singh & Nayanika Singh, 2013).

One of the key challenges in higher education is fostering learning self-regulation, which involves students actively managing their thoughts, emotions, motivation, and behaviors to achieve their academic goals (Panadero, 2017). Effective self-regulation strategies are beneficial, as they help students develop deeper knowledge, maintain learning goals, and improve academic performance. However, students often face emotional and motivational challenges that can interfere with learning, reduce motivation, and hinder the effective use of learning strategies (Pekrun et al., 2002). To succeed academically, students must employ strategies to regulate their emotions, especially when facing difficulties or failures. Research indicates that emotions mediate the relationship between goals, beliefs, and learning behaviors, influencing students' ability to persist in their academic tasks (Ben-Eliyahu, 2019; Pekrun et al., 2002). Those who effectively regulate their emotions are more likely to stay motivated and engaged until they master a concept or skill. Additionally, emotions are closely linked to key components of self-regulated learning, such as interest, motivation, and learning strategies, all of which contribute to academic success (Asikainen et al., 2018).

Table 5 showing the results for the gender difference in emotional regulation difficulties among PUC students using Independent T-Test

Independent T- test

F	0.402
Sig.	0.527
t	2.931
Asymp. Sig (2- tailed)	0.004*

24 The study found significant gender differences in emotional regulation difficulties among high school students as seen in table 5, with male students ($M = 100.3$, $SD = 1.43$) scoring higher than female students ($M = 94.6$, $SD = 1.30$), indicating that boys struggle more with emotional regulation. Several factors contribute to this difference, including societal norms, biological influences, and socialization patterns. From an early age, boys are often discouraged from expressing vulnerability, which can lead them to channel emotions like sadness or fear into anger or aggression, limiting their ability to develop emotional regulation skills. Biological factors, such as hormonal differences and lower language and inhibitory control in boys, further contribute to these difficulties. Additionally, social and cultural influences shape emotional expression, with boys encouraged to externalize emotions (e.g., anger), while girls are more likely to internalize emotions (e.g., sadness, anxiety). Research suggests that girls tend to use more adaptive strategies, like cognitive reappraisal, while boys may have fewer opportunities to develop these skills due to restrictive emotional norms. Poor emotional regulation in boys can lead to academic struggles, engagement in risky behaviors, and increased risks of depression and aggression. To address these challenges, targeted interventions should focus on teaching boys' emotional regulation strategies, such as cognitive reframing and reappraisal, while encouraging healthy emotional expression. Creating supportive environments that promote emotional diversity can improve boys' emotional regulation, ultimately enhancing their academic success and long-term well-being.

12
21
34 The final step in analysis was the interpretation of the interviews. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in data representation. A descriptive analysis was used to examine the data. Responses to the open-ended questions were transcribed, coded, and grouped based on common themes within each question. Repetitive responses were identified to recognize patterns and similarities in the data. Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes and patterns in teachers' responses regarding students' emotional regulation and academic motivation. The most common emotional challenges affecting students' motivation as per teachers included anxiety about grades, which leads to procrastination and avoidance (T1), frustration and low self-esteem, causing students to internalize failure (T2), and impulsivity, resulting in rash academic decisions (T3). Some students according to teachers, experience apathy due to feeling overwhelmed (T4), while social comparison, especially through social media, lowers self-confidence and motivation (T5). Emotional struggles can manifest as outbursts or complete withdrawal from learning (T6). Family pressure adds to stress, making students anxious and disengaged (T7). Lastly, a lack of resilience prevents students from bouncing back after setbacks, reducing their perseverance (T8). Teachers also observed that

2 students with poor emotional regulation often exhibit outbursts, avoidance behaviors, or disengagement, making it difficult for them to stay motivated. In contrast, those who effectively regulate emotions are more likely to remain focused, resilient, and proactive in their studies. Additionally, educators emphasized the need for supportive learning environments, mindfulness practices, and emotional skill-building interventions to help students manage emotions constructively and sustain academic motivation. These insights suggest that fostering strong emotional regulation skills is essential for enhancing students' academic engagement and overall performance.

Conclusion

36 The current study highlights the significant relationship between difficulties in emotion regulation and academic motivation among teenagers. The findings indicate that adolescents who struggle with managing their emotions tend to have lower levels of academic motivation, which can negatively impact their academic performance. Emotion regulation plays a crucial role in students' ability to engage with their academic tasks, and difficulties in this area can hinder their overall academic experience. Given the widespread emotional challenges faced by teens, it is essential to address these difficulties to improve their motivation and academic outcomes. By fostering better emotional regulation skills, students can enhance their ability to stay focused, manage stress, and approach academic tasks with greater resilience. This can lead to improved academic performance and overall well-being. The study suggests that interventions aimed at enhancing emotional regulation can play a crucial role in boosting academic motivation. Educators, parents, and mental health professionals can support students by providing tools and strategies to manage their emotions, create a supportive learning environment, and encourage intrinsic motivation. Additionally, helping students set clear academic goals and making learning more engaging and meaningful can further enhance motivation. Fostering students' physical, mental, and emotional well-being through engaging teaching methods and a nurturing school environment can further enhance motivation. Offering students some control over their learning, linking tasks to their personal goals, and ensuring that activities strike an appropriate balance between challenge and manageability can all help boost engagement and motivation. Overall, the study underscores the importance of addressing emotional regulation in promoting academic success. By understanding the interplay between emotion regulation and motivation, educators and caregivers can better support teens in overcoming emotional barriers, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes and personal growth.

Implications and Recommendations

8 The study highlights the need for schools to integrate emotional regulation training into their curricula. Strategies such as mindfulness exercises, cognitive-behavioral techniques, and emotional awareness programs can help students develop better emotion regulation skills. Additionally, fostering a supportive and engaging learning environment, providing students with autonomy in their learning, and aligning academic tasks with their interests and goals can enhance motivation. Parents and educators play a vital role in supporting adolescents' emotional and academic development. By understanding the emotional struggles faced by students and

collaborating to address these challenges, stakeholders can promote resilience, well-being, and academic success.

Future Directions

Future research could investigate the role of external influences, such as family dynamics, peer relationships, teacher support, and socioeconomic status, as potential moderators or mediators of this relationship. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how these variables evolve over time and identify critical periods for interventions during adolescence. Intervention-based research could explore the effectiveness of strategies like mindfulness training, cognitive-behavioral therapy, or emotion-focused interventions to enhance both emotion regulation skills and academic motivation. Cross-cultural studies would be valuable in examining how cultural and contextual factors, such as societal norms and education systems, shape this relationship. Additionally, studies focusing on gender, personality traits, and individual differences could reveal how these factors influence the interplay between emotions and motivation. In the context of today's digital age, research on how technology and social media impact emotion regulation and academic motivation among teens could uncover relevant insights.

Limitations

The current study had some limitations: firstly, the cross-sectional design of the study prevents any conclusions about causality between emotion regulation difficulties and academic motivation. Secondly, the study relied on self-report measures, which may introduce bias such as social desirability or inaccuracies in self-perception. Teens may not accurately assess their own emotional regulation skills or motivation levels, potentially impacting the reliability of the findings. Incorporating multi-method approaches, including teacher or parent assessments and observational methods, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the variables. Third, the sample may lack generalizability, as it was limited to teens from a specific geographical location, age group, or type of school (e.g., private schools). Fourth, the study did not account for other potential factors influencing academic motivation, such as personality traits, family support, peer relationships, or mental health conditions. These confounding variables could play a significant role in shaping the relationship between emotion regulation and motivation, suggesting the need for a more comprehensive analytical framework in future research. The study could have also, done few interviews or focus groups with the students to get conclusive evidence supportive of the quantitative data about their academic motivation and emotion regulation as well as to provide deeper insight into adolescents' lived experiences.

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