

The burning desire for as education essay



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The turning point of my life came the following year. The Malaysian education system required all 10th grade students to choose either the Pure Science stream, the Sub-Science stream or the Art stream. The Science Stream was more desirable for smart students. As an average student, I did not think that I would be able to cope with the smarter students in the Science stream. So, I opted for Sub-Science.

On the first midterm exam, I managed to come out as top student in class. I have never achieved anything like that before. From that day onwards, I studied day and night to maintain my grades. Studying took top priority in my to-do-list. I would read and reread my textbooks at least three times before I sat for a test. The dining table at home was piled up with my text and exercise books. Soon, everyone started eating in front of the TV because there was no room on the dining table. All my effort paid off when my grades improved from B's and C's to A's. Teachers started noticing me and they praised me for my achievements. The desire to receive A's pushed me to study harder and harder. I was addicted. By the end of my high school days, I was the top Accounting student in school.

I choose to explore this educational experience of my life because I want to know what made me change from a student who cared less about the future to a student who takes education so seriously. I want to find out what made me chose Sub-Science while everyone else chose Pure Science and how this decision affected my studies.

The first psychological concept that was evident in this educational experience was self-concept. Specifically, how past experiences develop

academic self-concept which then influences the selection of coursework. Self-concept is defined as the overall idea of what we think of ourselves; it is a cognitive structure. This includes our beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, feelings, and expectations. It is not constant and could change from one phase of life to another. Through self-evaluations, comparisons, and past experiences on assignments and exams, students develop their self-concept. In 2008, Herbert Marsh conducted an experiment to study how different classroom environments (average vs. high-achieving) affected students' academic self-concept (Woolfolk 2011). He found that students in a class of equal ability showed a decline in their academic self-concept. On the other hand, students who are strong in Math in an average class developed better self-concept compared to when they were in a class of equal ability. A student in an average class has a higher chance of doing well on tests, assuming that this student is good at Math, for example. Conversely, when the same student is placed in a smarter class or even in a class of equal ability, he may feel intimidated by the other higher achieving students. His work maybe the same and not "outstanding" compared to the other students' work. This feeling of intimidation may interfere with the student's ability to perform well on tests. It is easy to see how this situation could affect a student's academic self-concept.

Students select their courses based on their academic self-concept. An experiment conducted by Herbert Marsh and Alexander Yeung in 1997 studied how students selected their courses and the results were that the students selected their courses based on their subject-specific self-concept. Students who had higher math self-concept took more math classes and the

same goes for science classes (Woolfolk 2011). A student who finds it hard to understand a subject's material may obtain lower test scores. This student's self-concept in this subject may decrease if the problem persists.

Consequently, according to Marsh and Yeung, this student will not take classes that are related to the subjects that he/she have a poor self-concept in.

In my educational experience, I chose not to take biology because I always did poorly in science compared to the rest of the class; I felt that I was not capable of it. My failures to do well in previous exams decreased my academic self-concept in biology. Therefore, my self-concept in biology affected my choice of choosing Sub-Science. Until now, I have never taken any classes in biology because of my preexisting self-concept in the subject.

The second psychological concept that applies to my high school experience is positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is directly linked to the study of operant conditioning. In operant conditioning, an environmental event (antecedent) causes a voluntary behavior (behavior) to increase or decrease based on the outcome (consequence). When a behavior is increased by presenting a stimulus, positive reinforcement has taken place. This reinforcer can be anything and in any form from a reward, feedback, gift, to an activity. The most famous behavioral psychologist who studied positive reinforcement was B. F. Skinner. In his experiment, he placed a hungry rat in a box. The box contained a food lever and every time the rat pushed the lever, a food pellet would drop into the container. Soon, the rat learned this pattern and repeated its behavior of pushing the lever (McLeod 2007). In this experiment, that the rat was hungry was the antecedent,

causing it to search for food. The behavior that increased was pushing the lever, and the reinforcer was the food pellet. In my educational experience, getting good grades was the antecedent. The behavior that was reinforced was studying for an exam. The reinforcers were praises and recognition from my teachers. Without reinforcement, students put less effort into studying because there is little in it for them. But when reinforcements are present such as getting good grades, positive feedback, and praises from others, students are more likely to study in order to keep receiving these reinforcements. In my educational experience, I continuously studied harder and harder because I wanted my teacher to praise and acknowledge my hard work. This circle of events led to an upward spiral of determination and success in my studies.

A psychological concept that could have furthered my educational experience was the concept of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation comes from within the individual. It is a person's own desire and drive to do something without being rewarded by an external force. It is our personal interest that we find enjoyment in doing. The same concept could be applied to the educational setting through intrinsic goal framing. Deci was a famous psychologist who researched on how goals were framed affected students' motivation. In 2006, he conducted a research on two groups of students. Activities and assignments to the first group of students focused on intrinsic goals such as self-improvement, personal satisfaction, and growing competence on the task at hand. Alternatively, the same activities and assignments to the second group of students focused on extrinsic goals such as getting good grades, meeting requirements, and getting ready for the

future. He found that students who were motivated by intrinsic goals used deeper learning strategies, persisted longer and strove harder (Woolfolk, 2011). Framing learning goals to achieve intrinsic values takes the pressure and anxiety off students. In addition, intrinsic motivation erases students' mindsets that they are as smart as their test scores.

Another way to encourage intrinsic motivation in the classroom is to use authentic task when teaching students. Authentic tasks are tasks that possess real value and have a connection to real-life applications. It is the knowledge that students would mostly likely use out of school, according to their interest. The effectiveness of authentic tasks and interest in learning was researched by Pugh and Phillips in 2011. A group of students were told to memorize definitions and learn facts that were going to be on the test. Another group of students were given instances on how the same subject matter would take place in real life, coupled with real-life examples. Pugh and Phillips found that students were more likely to appreciate the subject being taught when they saw a practical utility to the course material (Woolfolk, 2011). Therefore, teachers should reframe school tasks to fit real-life situations according to their students' interest as much as possible to engage the students to the material. When students see a connection between course material and application to their personal interests, they will be more intrinsically driven to learn. The goal of learning moves from performance to mastery goals when students focus on the learning process and not the product.

My learning experience would have been better had my teachers reframed school tasks and assignments to fit the authentic tasks idea explained

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above. Authentic tasks and intrinsic motivation encourage mastery goals. With mastery goals, the goal is to gain a deeper understanding of a subject compared to a shallow knowledge of facts that might appear on a test. Students with mastery goals care less about how they measure up with the other students because they are focused on self-improvement. My educational goal in the setting above was definitely one of performance because I felt successful only after getting A's and being better than everyone else. Without having the pressure of being only as smart as my last test scores, my learning experience would have been much more meaningful and less stressful.

In conclusion, through this analysis of my high school experience, I finally understood why I chose to enter the Sub-Science classes. My failures on past exams in science caused my self-concept in this subject to decrease. Therefore, I chose not to take biology. This study also brought to my attention the type of goal that I had set for myself in high school. I had a performance goal, which was focused completely on getting good grades. This explained the level of stress and pressure I was facing. I lost motivation and interest in subjects that I could not get A's in. Even B's were not enough for me. I would say now that I had the wrong attitude of learning. Unfortunately, this mindset has influenced my learning motivation and habit for a long time. Now, after learning more about intrinsic motivation and mastery goals, I want to change my take on studying and learning. I want to learn for the sake of learning. Therefore, my next goal in this class and beyond is to find a balance between enjoying the subject's material and performing well on tests.