

## Self Concepts and Motivation To Learn Among Students

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Abstract: In Malaysia, more than half of the population are adolescent and most of them are students who are still studying either in schools or in higher institutions of learning. We should be proud that even though there is no punishment to enforce education, 99 percent of the schooling age children are getting their education. Whether they are willing to learn or reach level depend on many factors. For now, most of the students learn just to pass their exam and not learning continuously through life as we hope for. Is it because the students are not motivated to learn because of their negative self concept? or is it the teachers and parents who cause the students not to be motivated and encouraged to learn and excel, what more to compete in education? The answer lies in all the significant people who should play their role in developing positive self concept to motivate students to learn.

### **1.0 Introduction**

How we see our world makes all the difference, and when we see ourselves as we really are, it can have a significant impact on altering the way we view the world around us.

So, what is self concept? How do we come to understand ourselves and other people? How do students develop a sense of right and wrong and how do these beliefs affect their behaviour especially in the study habit in learning? According to Woolfolk (1993), children's understandings of themselves are concrete at first but become more abstract later. Early view of self and friends are based on immediate behaviours and appearance. Children believe that what they feel, others will also feel it too. Their thinking about themselves and others are simple, segmented and not flexible and integrated. In time, they are able to think abstractly about internal processes like beliefs, intentions, values and motivation. With this knowledge of self, others and situations, they can form a more abstract qualities.

Self concept can be defined as the set of attitudes a person holds towards himself and it is an important concept because the current studies of human behaviour arises from the desire of individuals to know about themselves and understand what makes them tick (Burns and Dobson, 1984)

We can also consider the self concept to be our attempt to explain ourselves to ourselves, to build a scheme ( in Piaget's terms) that organises our impressions, feelings and attitudes about ourselves and this scheme is not permanent, always changing (Woolfolk, 1993, pg 74)

J. Brophy (1988) describes student motivation to learn as follows:

'Student motivation to learn is a student tendency to find academic activities meaningful and worthwhile and to try to derive the intended academic benefits from them.'

It means working towards learning goals. The point is to understand and improve, not just to perform well (pass the exams). This motivation, according to Woolfolk(1993) can often be in:

- People (students) who find learning intrinsically rewarding. They value knowing and expanding their store of information. Learning is interesting and satisfying for them
- Other students learn out of a sense of duty. They believe they should get the maximum benefit from any experience even if they didn't choose the experience in the first place.
- There are also students who take lesson activities seriously. They try to understand and improve, not just finish the work or get the grade. They pay attention, work hard and persist, even if they are not particularly interested in the topic.

A study done by the U.S. National Dropout Prevention Centre shows that student with positive self concept, have high or strengthened self esteem are more motivated to learn and successful. Students who have negative self concept and low self esteem usually are not motivated to learn and drop out from school. These school dropouts formed 88.5% of new drug addicts (Malay) that was caught in 2001 (Berita Harian, Khamis, 9 Oktober 2003).

## **2.0 The developing self concept**

J.Canfield & H.C. Wells (1976) defined self concept as ‘Your self concept is composed of all the beliefs and attitudes you have about yourself, they actually determine who you are. They also determine what you think you are,what you do and what you can become.’ Self concept development is largely the direct feedback from significant others, from objective facts and from one’s intepretation of body image. Parents, peers and teachers are the major sources of input, about the self which is subjectively interpreted.

The change in self concept occurs with maturity, that comes with age and experience, but mostly from adapting to different people and situations.Our self concept are in a state of change and are more readily influenced by current experiences as a result of:

- Our personal aspirations
- Changing roles and behaviour
- Criticism from others and greater self directions

If we see the self concept of students, Midgeley and Adler (1984) divide it into three aspects; cognitive,social and physical and every student has a different self concept.

- Cognitive – refers to the students belief in their academic performance, whether they are good and successful or slow and a failure.
- Social – the students’ belief in their ability to interact or socialise with others.
- Physical – the students’ belief in their performance in sport

When students mature, they will make specific assesment about themselves, for example a student who sees himself not good in English language only but good in other field has a cognitive aspect self concept.This view of self concept is shown in the diagram

below.

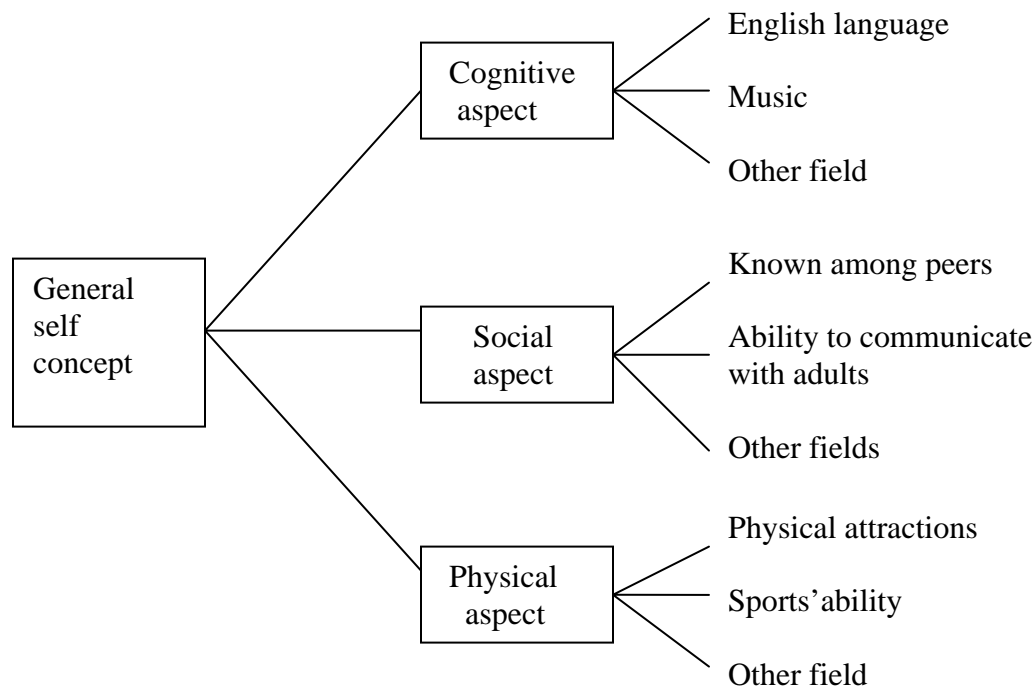


Figure 1. Hierarchy of students self concept

## 2.1 How is self concept develop?

Wattenberg (1962) states that self concept develops by

- learning and it is not inherited.
- Our beliefs
- Our personality that portrays our external self
- Actions and emotion in line with dominant beliefs
- Past experiences perceptions

According to Hamachek (1971), self concept develops through

- Success
- Failure

- Insulting remarks or actions
- Feeling of pride and pleasure
- Friends' assesment
- Friends' reaction

## **2.2 Factors affecting the development of self concepts of students**

- Parents
- Brothers and sisters
- Peers
- Teachers
- School
- Child care or baby sitter
- The mass media

## **2.3 Types of self concept**

Self concept can be divided into two types; positive self concept and negative self concept. The table below shows the two different types of self concept of students and the factors affecting it.

Types of self concept	Factors that influence the self concept
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<p><b>Students with positive self concept</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually successful in life</li> <li>• Confident, broad minded</li> <li>• Always happy and friendly</li> <li>• Undertands life and has ambition</li> <li>• Optismitic, can accept failure and criticism</li> <li>• Humble, active and able to inteact with others</li> <li>• Relaxed and emotionally stable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insentives – in the form of verbal appreciation and encouragement and presents</li> <li>• Positive enforcement from parents and teachers and others</li> <li>• Loved and well treated by parents and peers</li> <li>• Conduasive school environment</li> </ul>
<p><b>Students with negative self concept</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually a failure</li> <li>• Not confident, narrow minded</li> <li>• Always not happy and unfriendly</li> <li>• No ambition and objective in life</li> <li>• Pessimistic, cannot accept failure and criticism</li> <li>• Not humble and sensitive</li> <li>• Passive and not able to interact with others, dull and boring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not appreciated and encouraged but always criticised</li> <li>• Broken family</li> <li>• No love and attention from parents, teachers and peers</li> <li>• Low sosioeconomic group</li> <li>• Physically handicapped</li> </ul>

Table 1. Positive and negative self concept and factors affecting it

### 3.0 Motivation to learn

Motivation means those processes that influence the arousal, strength or direction of behaviour (R.Arkes, J.P.Garske, 1982) or an internal state that arouses, directs and maintain behaviour (Woolfolk).

Two types of motivation are:

- Intrinsic motivation

Motivation that stems from factors such as interest or curiosity that do not need incentives or punishments because the activity itself is rewarding. We enjoy the task or the sense of accomplishment that it brings.

- Extrinsic motivation

Motivation that arise from what we will gain (external factors). We do something in order to learn a reward, avoid punishment, please the teacher or for some other reason that is not connected to the task.

The psychologists definition to learn is a process which experience (interaction of a person with his or her environment) causes permanent change in knowledge or behaviour .In the broadest sense, it is an internal mental activity that cannot be observed directly.

Many elements make up motivation to learn .These include planning, concentration on the goal, meta cognitive awareness of what you intend to learn and how you intend to learn it, the active search for new information, clear perceptions of feedback, pride and satisfaction in achievement and no anxiety or fear of failure (Johnson & Johnson, 1985)

Motivation to learn includes the quality of the students' mental efforts.For example, reading the text 10 times may be very persistent, but motivation to learn means more thoughtful, active studies strategies. These includes summarising, elaborating the



basic ideas, outlining in your own words, drawing graphs of the key relationships and so on (Brophy, 1998).

There are two types of students (learners):

- Task involved learners
- Ego involved learners

Figure 2 below describes these learners.

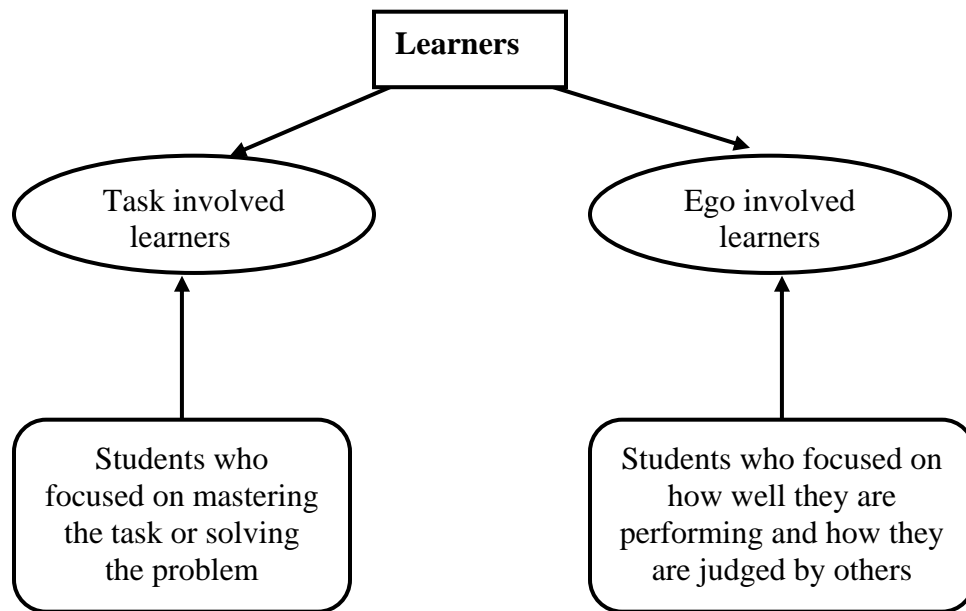


Figure 2. Tasked involved learners and ego involved learners

Not all the students in the class will have the motivation to learn. Teachers have two major goals;

- 1) to create a state of motivation to learn in class
- 2) to develop in our students the trait of being motivated to learn

To do so, we need to depend on both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and know about the external environmental factors that can affect motivation to learn among students.

#### **4.0 Strategies to develop positive self concept and encourage motivation to learn among students.**

Before students have motivation to learn, they must first develop a positive self concept. Listed below are the steps for developing a positive self concept among students.

##### **a) Built up a skill**

Everyone is unique and has potential in a certain field. If we are good and excel in a certain field, students should focus on a field that they are best in even if not academically, it can be music or sport. If they are good in a certain field, this will give them confidence and boost their self esteem.

##### **b) Learn to accept your self as you are now**

Students should learn to accept themselves as they are, may it be physically, mentally, socio-economic status, responsibilities, weaknesses and so on without being like others or making comparison with others. Don't think about past achievements which are over but the future which is more important. Try to avoid thinking about your ideal self or what you want to be in the future. For now think about your real self now.

##### **c) Observing people with high self esteem**

By observing people with high self esteem, we can see how they communicate effectively with others, how they face negative response, the way they talk, sit, walk, how they do their work or study and so on. We can learn from these people but we don't have

to be like them or else we will lose our own identity. If we lose our own identity, this can destroy our self esteem.

**d) Reading the biography of people we admire and watching videos of important and prominent figures**

Biographies and video portray the backgrounds, education, way of life, achievements, success, failures and many more facts about someone. From the biographies and video of important and successful people we can get tips and hints on how to ;

- Face problems
- Solve conflicts
- Become successful after failure

**e) List down all your good points**

With the help of friends, family members and significant people, list down all your good points. Other people can see our good points more clearly than we see ourselves. With the list of good points, we will understand our self more and have high regards of our self (high self esteem).

**f) Avoid stalling**

Most people like to postpone, delay their work which will destroy our self esteem. This is because when the work is postponed, we will not reach our target or goal. This will cause our credibility to be questioned resulting in low self concept and negative self concept. But if we manage to finish the work, it will give us satisfaction. This satisfaction is important in developing positive self concept.

**g) Find a mentor**

A mentor is a person who will share their experiences with us. Mentoring involves two individuals that can interact and communicate with each other. One will act as the teacher and the other one as a student. This is a good way in developing a positive self concept. Another way is having a role model. A role model is a person who can be an example for us, can help us even though we are the one who is doing the work. In the learning process with mentor and role model, make sure our self identity is not lost. Don't be too dependent on them, we should succeed due to our own efforts.

#### **h) Use positive self talk**

Positive self talk means telling our self that we are O.K, we can do something well. When we use positive self talk, don't use sentence that are general like "I would like to be a good student" but change it to "I would like to be the best student in the school, academically and non academically." The objective must be very specific. Moreover, what is said is for now, not for the past or the future. Psychologists regard positive self talk as self predictive achievement or as self purpose power. This means when we stick to what we believe, it will come true. When we succeed to do something that increase our self esteem, we should give our self incentive as an encouragement and enforcement. Self evaluation or self assesment is important because there is no other assesment as important as self evaluation.

#### **i) Beware of the pygmalion effect**

The Pygmalion effect is used by Professor Robert Rosenthal of Harvard University. The word comes from the Greek myths about King pygmalion, King of Cyprus. The myth says that the king curved a statue of a perfect woman. He fell in love with his own creation. His desire to create a perfect woman was so strong that he

believed he could make the woman alive in him. His positive belief makes his dream become reality to him. The pygmalion effect refers to the tendency to let other people's communication affects our behaviour. For example, when a teacher say that 'you are dumb', 'You will fail' to a student, it will affect the students behaviour and in the end the student will fail. But if the student has a positive self concept and high self esteem, he won't be influenced by the negative statements made.

Eccles and Wigfield (1985) summarised the influence of students motivation to learn in a particular situation in three basic questions

- Can I succeed at this task?
- Do I want to succeed at this task?
- What do I need to do to succeed?

What do we expect from our students? Listed below are what we hope they will have due to the motivation to learn;

- We want students to have confidence in their ability, so they will approach learning with energy and enthusiasm
- We want them to see the value of the tasks involve and work to learn, not just to pass or finished the work.
- We want students to believe that success will come if they apply good learning strategies instead of believing that their only option is giving reasons for failure.
- When things got difficult, we want students to stay focused and solve the problem, not got so worried about failure that they 'freeze' (panicked)

Strategies to encourage motivation to learn among students (Woolfolk, 1993).

1) Fulfil basic requirements

- Provide an organised class environment free from constant interruptions and disruptions
- Be a supportive leader, never punishes, criticises or embarrass students for mistakes
- Assign challenging work but not too difficult
- Make the work (tasks) worth while
- Give definitions or materials that are going to be used

## 2) Build confidence and positive expectations

- Begin work at the students' level and move in small steps. Give easy and difficult questions in all tests and assignments
- Make learning goals clear, specific and realistic
- Stress self comparison not comparison with others. Show the connections between their effort and accomplishment.
- Communicate , tell the students that academic performance can be improved.
- Model good problem solving , let student see solutions can be reached by several approaches to see that learning is not smooth and error free even for the teacher

## 3. Show them the value of learning ( intrinsic value)

- Connect the learning task to the needs of the students for safety , belonging and achievements in class
- Class activities should compliment student's interests. Arouse curiosity by discussing topics that are puzzling and different from beliefs.
- Make the learning task fun, through simulations and games
- Make use of novelty and familiarity – vary the teaching and motivation strategies

- Explain connections between present learning and letter life, story telling about achievements of former students
- Provide insentives and rewards if necessary

#### 4. help student stay focused on the task

- Give student frequence opportunities to respond
- Provide opportunities for students to create finished product
- Avoid heavy emphasis on grading
- Reduce task risk without oversimplifying the task
- Model motivation to learn
- Teach the particular learning tactic,show students how to learn and remember.

### **5.0 Conclusion**

Students should have a positive selfconcept in order to be self motivated and have a stable self,to be motivated to learn.When students have high regards for themselves, they will be high achievers academically and good citizen.It is very important for students to be stable and have all the positive traits because they are the ones who is going to determine the country's harmony and prosperity. Everybody should play an important role in developing positive self concept and encourage motivation to learn among students.We are what we are but we will be what we want to be.

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