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“Learners’ Mistakes” from the Perspective of Educational Psychology

-- An Opportunity for Growth

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Abstract: Learners’ mistakes are incorrect behaviours, answers or understandings that occur during the learning process. Currently, the mistakes are often misperceived and not well tolerated in current society, leading to a fear of error and failure, which affects students’ psychological well-being. However, there are important meanings and values behind “mistakes” or “errors”, such as providing opportunities for feedback and adjustment, stimulating critical thinking skills, reinforcing memory and understanding, and promoting the development of mental resilience and adaptability. As educators, we should cultivate a correct view of “mistakes” in school education; fully respect students and gradually guide them to move from “wrong” to “right”, to manage the learning mistakes and enhance innovative thinking on their own.

Keywords: Mistakes in learning; Mental health; Individual development

1. What are "learners’ mistakes"?

Learners’ mistakes can be defined as errors or incorrect understandings, responses or behaviours that occur during the process of learning and knowledge acquisition. It can cover a variety of areas, including academics, skill development, personal growth and social interaction. The errors are a natural part of the learning process that everyone experiences, and they arise from misinterpretation of information, inappropriate application of skills, biased thinking, failed experiments, and so on. Learners’ mistakes are simply incorrect behaviours or thinking that result from trying and exploring, and their presence does not imply a low level of personal competence.

The definition also emphasizes the value and significance of errors and mistakes. It is seen as an opportunity to provide feedback and guidance to help the individual realize what is wrong so that corrections and improvements can be made. If students’ errors are properly confronted and utilized, individuals can achieve better understanding and mastery of knowledge, skills and concepts and achieve further personal development and growth.

2. Should "learners’ mistakes" be discouraged?

2.1 Bigotry and fear of mistakes can have a negative impact on students at all levels of achievement

Learners’ mistakes are often misunderstood and not tolerated in society. In some educational environments, mistakes are viewed as a shame and punishment rather than an opportunity to learn and grow. In competitive educational environments where students are under intense academic pressure, the fear of mistakes stems from the fear of the consequences of failure. For example, in terms of academics, students with top grades are always expected to perform well. They are under pressure to maintain their role as top students, and are pressed by the expectations of their parents, teachers, or classmates to achieve good grades in order to prove their ability and worth. In such a process, students become afraid of making mistakes, and worry that failure will lead to a worse evaluation of them by others, and that their self-esteem will be harmed. Unwilling to face criticism and negative evaluations, students will choose to avoid mistakes. Mid-range students are also fearful of making mistakes. They want to make progress to get more attention from their teachers and peers, but if they make a mistake, their low self-confidence will suffer a bigger blow than other students. Students at the bottom end of the achievement scale are also concerned about making mistakes. They may face the greatest academic challenges and difficulties, and often have a negative self-assessment of their own abilities, with labels such as "poor" and "unintelligent" fuelling their fear, anxiety and self-doubt. Labels such as "poor" and "unintelligent" can increase their fear, anxiety and self-doubt about mistakes, and they worry that the next "mistake" will cause teachers and peers to give up on them completely. In short, the paranoia and fear of "mistakes" can greatly affect students' mental health.

2.2 Mistakes in learning are of great value and significance

Prejudices and misconceptions in society, culture and the education system have led to mistakes being seen as unacceptable. However,