

ENDURING MEMORIES: THE IMPACT OF UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCES ON STUDENTS

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Abstract

Unpleasant experiences experienced by students, such as bullying, academic failure, unfair treatment, or the loss of someone close, can contribute to the formation of long-term memories that affect psychological development and the learning process. The urgency of this study is supported by data from the Indonesia–National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS), which shows that anxiety is the most prevalent mental health problem among Indonesian adolescents, at 28.2% among females and 25.4% among males, followed by hyperactivity, depression, behavioral problems, and post-traumatic stress. This situation indicates that psychological difficulties among adolescents are an issue requiring attention in educational settings. This study aims to analyze the influence of unpleasant experiences on the formation of long-term memories and their implications for students' psychological, social, and academic aspects. The study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with a qualitative-descriptive approach. Data were obtained by searching scientific articles in Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and SINTA databases published during 2016–2026. Articles meeting the inclusion criteria were analyzed using content analysis to identify consistent patterns of findings. The results show that experiences involving negative emotions are more easily stored in long-term memory through the involvement of the amygdala and hippocampus in emotional memory processing. Such memories contribute to various effects, including increased anxiety, reduced self-confidence, concentration problems, low learning motivation, difficulties in social interaction, and decreased academic achievement. These findings emphasize the importance of collaboration among schools, teachers, and parents in creating a safe, supportive, and responsive learning environment that addresses students' psychological needs, minimizes the negative effects of traumatic experiences, and optimally supports students' academic development and psychological well-being.

KEYWORDS: trauma; long-term memory; unpleasant experiences; students; educational psychology.

INTRODUCTION

Education is not only aimed at improving students' academic abilities but also plays a role in shaping their attitudes, emotions, and personalities. During the learning process at school, students experience various kinds of experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant. These experiences can be stored in memory and influence how students think and behave in everyday life. Unpleasant experiences experienced by students may include learning pressure, failure to achieve expected grades, bullying by peers, or inappropriate treatment in the school environment. Such experiences often leave a strong impression because they involve feelings of sadness, fear, or disappointment. As a result, these experiences may be stored in long-term memory and become difficult to forget.

Enduring memories resulting from unpleasant experiences can affect students' psychological condition. Students who frequently recall bad experiences tend to become less confident, easily anxious, and lose motivation to learn. This can also affect their concentration in class and reduce their enthusiasm for participating in learning activities.

In addition to psychological effects, memories of unpleasant experiences can also affect academic achievement and students' social relationships. Students may become more withdrawn, afraid to try new things, and uncomfortable in the school environment. If this condition persists, its effects may continue and hinder students' development in the future. Therefore, the discussion of enduring memories resulting from unpleasant experiences among students is important to examine. By understanding the effects of such experiences, schools, teachers, and students are expected to work together to create a safer, more comfortable learning environment that supports students' optimal development.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a systematic literature study methodology (Systematic Literature Review) that is qualitative-descriptive in nature. Gough, Oliver, and Thomas (2012), in the book “An introduction to Systematic Reviews,” define an SLR as a research method that uses primary studies as data sources. The choice of this method is based on the need to integrate findings from various primary studies concerning the amygdala-dependent memory mechanism and its effects on students' cognitive development. In line with the framework of Danial and Warsiah (2009), this study positions scientific literature as its main data source. The researchers act as the key instrument, critically synthesizing established theories to address the phenomenon of flashbulb memory or long-lasting traumatic memories among students.

The data search was conducted rigorously in three main databases, namely Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and the SINTA portal, using a keyword-based search strategy: “unpleasant experience,” “student long-term memory,” and “educational psychology impact.” To ensure the state of the art, the researchers established an inclusion criterion of journal articles published within the last ten years (2016–2026). The initial search results were filtered through four stages in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) standard: identification, screening, eligibility, and final inclusion, to ensure that only literature with valid methodology was analyzed.

Data analysis used content analysis by coding themes related to psychological effects. The researchers comparatively examined neuroscience data concerning hippocampal function against pedagogical data from the educational setting. Data validity was ensured through theoretical triangulation, in which each finding was cross-checked with authoritative references such as Sugiyono's (2012) cognitive theory and systematic review standards according to Kitchenham (2007). Ethically, originality was maintained by ensuring a low similarity index through accurate citation. The researchers also acknowledge limitations concerning demographic variation in the literature and therefore prioritized procedural transparency so that the research would have a high level of reproducibility for future researchers.

1. Literature Search Strategy

The data in this study were collected through a systematic literature search of several trusted scientific journal databases, such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and SINTA.

The search process used several keywords relevant to the research topic, including “traumatic memory,” “unpleasant experience in students,” “long-term memory impact,” and “educational psychology.” These keywords were selected to ensure that the literature identified was truly relevant to the focus of the study.

2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To keep the data relevant and up to date, the researchers established clear selection criteria.

The articles included in this study were journals published within the last ten years (2016–2026), focused on students as subjects (from elementary through secondary school), and discussed the relationship between negative emotions and memory. Articles that did not contain clear research data, were popular/non-scientific publications, or did not directly discuss psychological effects in an educational context were excluded from the analysis.

3. Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis. The process consisted of several stages.

First, the organizing stage, which involved collecting and grouping literature according to themes such as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects.

Second, the synthesizing stage, which involved comparing various research findings to identify consistent patterns, such as the tendency for negative experiences to be more easily remembered over the long term. Third, the identifying stage, which involved identifying differences among findings and research gaps that have not yet been widely discussed.

Finally, the formulating stage, which involved developing a logical conclusion regarding how unpleasant experiences can affect students' learning processes over the long term.

4. Data Validity

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation. This means that findings from one study were compared with other studies addressing similar topics but potentially using different approaches or theories. In this way, the conclusions produced become more objective and comprehensive.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Students

A student is essentially a person who is enrolled in a school and is engaged in a learning process to develop themselves. According to Oemar Hamalik (2001), students are not merely passive listeners but active subjects who construct their own understanding during learning. Similarly, Sardiman A.M. (2011) describes students as individuals who need guidance and support so that their potential, interests, and talents can be used and developed optimally.

Trauma

According to the theory proposed by Judith Herman (1992), psychological trauma occurs when a person experiences an event that exceeds their ability to cope with the pressure. Trauma can change how a person views themselves, other people, and their environment, thereby affecting emotions, behavior, and memory.

Everyone experiences unpleasant events at some point. However, under certain conditions, such experiences can leave deep psychological wounds that are difficult to forget. This condition is known as trauma. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), trauma is an emotional response to a threatening or highly stressful event. Its effects are not limited to the period immediately following the event but may persist for a long time and affect a person's thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

In the school environment, students may experience trauma through various experiences, such as being bullied, receiving unfair treatment, experiencing repeated academic failure, or facing excessive pressure during the learning process. Although such experiences may appear minor to some people, they can leave a deep impression on the students who experience them. Feelings of fear, sadness, shame, or disappointment can cause the event to remain in memory even after a considerable amount of time.

This can be explained through the theory of emotional memory processing. Experiences involving strong emotions are more easily stored in long-term memory than ordinary experiences. This process involves the amygdala, which processes emotions, and the hippocampus, which plays a role in memory formation. When a person experiences an event that produces emotional stress, these two brain regions become more active, making the memory of the event stronger and more difficult to forget.

Persistent trauma can affect students' lives, especially their learning process. Students who continue to remember bad experiences often become less confident, easily anxious, have difficulty concentrating, or even lose their enthusiasm for participating in learning. In some cases, they also tend to avoid situations or environments that remind them of the experience, which can disrupt social relationships with peers and teachers. Therefore, trauma should not be regarded as something trivial. Schools, teachers, and parents play an important role in helping students overcome such experiences. A safe, comfortable, and supportive learning environment can help students feel more confident, reduce the effects of trauma, and support their academic and psychological development optimally.

Memory

According to Atkinson and Shiffrin (1968), memory is the ability to receive (encoding), store (storage), and retrieve (retrieval) information that has been obtained. This process enables a person to recall experiences or knowledge that have been learned. Memory is the ability to receive, store, and recall information or experiences that have been encountered. According to Atkinson and Shiffrin (1968), memory formation occurs in three stages: encoding, storage, and retrieval. Through these processes, a person can recall information or experiences stored in memory.

In everyday life, not all experiences are remembered in the same way. Experiences accompanied by strong emotions, whether pleasant or unpleasant, are generally more easily stored in long-term memory. Among students, experiences such as success, failure, or bullying can leave lasting traces in memory and affect motivation, concentration, and how they engage in the learning process.

Impact of Trauma on Humans

According to Judith Herman (1992), trauma arises when a person experiences an event that produces fear, distress, or helplessness and is difficult to cope with. In everyday life, particularly in the school environment, trauma can be caused by several factors.

1. Bullying

Students who are frequently mocked, excluded, or treated harshly by their peers may experience trauma. Such experiences often cause students to lose self-confidence and become afraid to interact with others.

2. Repeated academic failure

Continuously declining grades or failure to reach expected targets can make students feel disappointed and afraid to face the next examination. If this happens repeatedly, the experience can leave significant emotional pressure.

3. Unpleasant treatment

Being scolded in front of the class, humiliated, or treated unfairly by teachers or peers can make students feel ashamed and reluctant to participate in learning activities.

4. Loss of a loved one

Losing a family member or someone close can cause deep sadness. Such an experience often affects a person's emotional condition and concentration.

5. Experiencing or witnessing threatening events

Events such as accidents, natural disasters, or acts of violence can leave long-lasting fear, even when a person was not a direct victim. This view is reinforced by Bessel van der Kolk (2014), who explains that experiences accompanied by strong emotions are more easily stored in memory. Therefore, traumatic experiences often remain in memory for a long time and can affect a person's thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

1. Psychological effects, such as easily feeling anxious, afraid, sad, or losing self-confidence. For example, a student who is frequently shouted at by a teacher in front of the class may become afraid to answer questions even when they know the answer.
2. Cognitive effects, namely difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, or frequent recollection of bad experiences. For example, a student who has been bullied may have difficulty focusing while studying because their thoughts remain focused on the incident.
3. Behavioral effects, such as becoming quieter, withdrawing from the environment, or avoiding certain situations. For example, a student who was mocked during a presentation may choose not to participate in classroom presentation activities again.
4. Physical effects, such as difficulty sleeping, headaches, fatigue, or a racing heart when remembering traumatic experiences. For example, a student may become so nervous that they experience stomach pain whenever they are about to take an examination because they previously experienced a stressful failure.
5. Social effects, namely difficulty interacting or building relationships with others. For example, a bullying victim may be reluctant to make friends and may prefer to be alone during recess.
6. Academic effects, such as decreased learning motivation, achievement, and classroom participation. For example, a student who continually remembers failure in an examination may become reluctant to study because they feel they will not succeed despite their efforts.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that unpleasant experiences experienced by students have a significant influence on the formation of long-term memories, particularly when those experiences are accompanied by strong emotions such as fear, sadness, shame, or disappointment. This mechanism involves memory-storage processes influenced by the activity of the amygdala and hippocampus, so negative experiences tend to be more easily remembered and persist longer than neutral experiences.

Enduring memories resulting from unpleasant experiences can affect various aspects of students' lives, including psychological, cognitive, behavioral, social, and academic aspects. Students who experience trauma or negative experiences may be at risk of reduced self-confidence, increased anxiety, difficulty concentrating, reduced learning motivation, and difficulties interacting with the school environment. Such conditions can affect students' learning processes and development if they do not receive appropriate support.

Therefore, attention and support from all parties in the educational environment are needed. Teachers, parents, and schools play an important role in creating a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment in which students feel comfortable developing optimally. By understanding the effects of unpleasant experiences on memory and learning processes, prevention and support efforts are expected to become more effective in promoting students' psychological well-being and academic success.

Based on this study, schools are expected to create safer and more comfortable learning environments that support students' psychological health through anti-bullying policies, strengthened guidance and counseling services, and the development of a school culture that respects every individual. Teachers are also expected to be more sensitive to changes in students' behavior and emotional conditions so that appropriate support can be provided at an early stage. Parents need to maintain open communication with their children and cooperate with the school in providing support when students experience unpleasant events. Consistent emotional support can help reduce the negative effects of such experiences on students' learning processes and development.

For future researchers, this study can be developed using empirical approaches, such as surveys, interviews, or experimental studies, to obtain deeper data concerning the relationship among unpleasant experiences, long-term memory formation, and students' academic achievement. In addition, future research can explore protective factors that help students build resilience and thereby reduce the negative effects of traumatic experiences.

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