

**Let Me Learn in-service training: A teacher's experience**  
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Over the few years, a quiet but persistent shift in the way we understand the role of the teacher has been underway. The national minimum curriculum has set the direction for understanding the teaching profession in terms of competences and effectiveness. In *Creating the Future Together* (December,1999) in particular in Principle 12, the document defines an effective and competent teacher as a person who is professionally and academically prepared to safeguard democratic and social principles, attend to learning needs and developing the potential of every individual, and work with all stake holders to develop the educational process. Such competences cannot but develop within a culture of continuous professional development "through reading, reflection, exchange of ideas with colleagues, courses and ongoing experimentation" (p.41) .

This paper uses the voice of one teacher dealing with her class, and in particular a child who was offering challenging behaviour to show that a considerable difference in the teacher's and students' approach to learning has taken place as a result of this professional development. We hope to illustrate how the LML process served as a "liberating experience" both for the teacher as a young teacher and also for the child in her class.

This in-service professional development programme is build on a reflection and exchange of ideas between teachers and collaborative work between teachers and learners in their classrooms. This programme thus aims at involving teachers in an intensive and reflective process which assists teachers in transforming themselves to facilitators of learning by empowering young learners to take control of their own learning

Rapid social and economic transformations require greater learning from all students. This emerging society is reshaping the mission of education. Teachers "are now expected not only to offer education, but to ensure learning" (Darling-Hammond, L, 1996). Ensuring learning demands that teachers understand learners and their learning process as much as they understand their subject matter. The traditional view of the role of schools and teachers in particular that search for the right set of test prescriptions, textbooks

adoptions and curriculum directives to be packaged and mandated to guide practice have past its time. We now realise that only teachers, in collaboration with the other stakeholders (mainly parents and the school professional community) can bring about true change. Only dedicated teachers that understand the learner as a creator of knowledge (Vygotsky) and as an individual with a personal intellectual capability to transform and drive his or her own learning can truly bring about change. Change from teaching students, dependent on factors outside of themselves to a learner with lifelong skills of using his/her internal communication to make sense of the world.

Teachers that plan for such change, plan with intention, targeting the particular needs of the audience.

"To teach intentionally means to teach with full awareness of children as learners and with a conscious effort to support them in using their unique, very personal learning patterned operations matrices." (Osterman and Kottkamp, 2004)

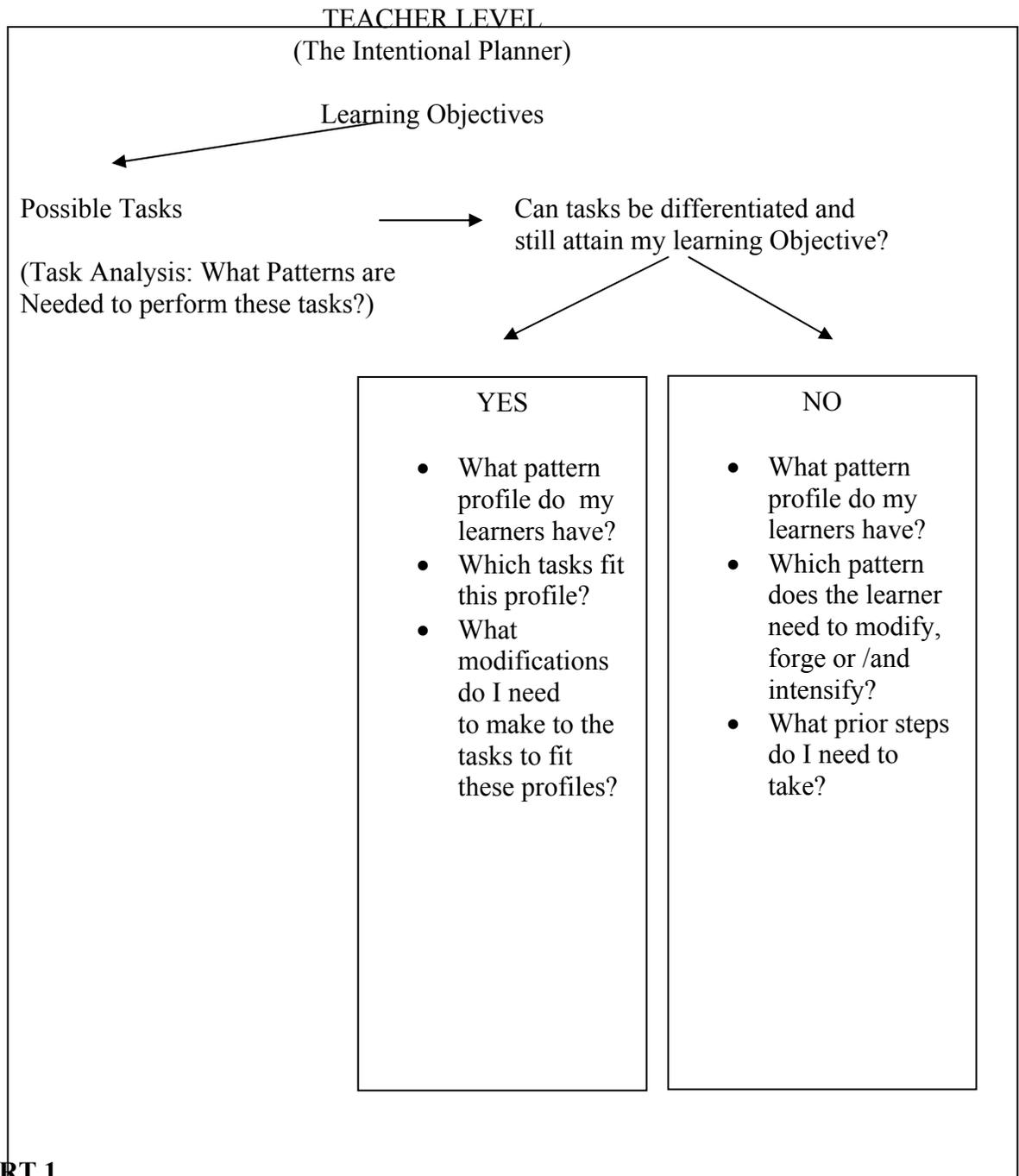
Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) uphold that the natural consequence of intentional teaching is intentional learning, which is

"characterised by the desire to grow in understanding and responsible ownership of the learning experience... Intentional learners make the learning process work for them by recognizing how they use their own learning processes to explore, understand, and grow in their ability to learn effectively." (163)

Facilitating intentional learning requires a new way of professional development strategies that build on acknowledgement of self as learners and move to a deeper understanding of the learning process as a paradigm of creative understanding and knowledge processing which is particular to each learner, but at the same time managed within a community of learners. Thus the Let Me Learn training programme aims at equipping teachers with the skill of transformable planning, planning which has the learner as the focus and build on skills to help learners accomplish intentional learning through "developing workable, personal learning strategies, negotiating with the learning environment (most important, the teacher), and developing respect for various learning modes" (Osterman and Kottkamp, 2004).

. This training programme which has as its conceptual framework the Interactive Learning Model (Johnston, 1994,1996.) provides teachers with the knowledge of how the three mental processes, namely Cognition, Conation and Affectation (Philip, 1936) synchronically interact to form within the four patterned operations, namely sequence, precision, technical reasoning and confluence. These mental operations function as part of the interface between the brain-mind connection, at the juncture where stimulus which has entered the brain is translated into symbols which the mind can process and store in order to retain, retrieve when needed. Thus the act of translating these stimuli into symbols of language, numeracy, etc, involves the interactive mesh of our mental processes, namely the four identified learning patterns. This training programme also provides teachers with a forum to transform knowledge into practical metacognitive strategies that they use as a tool in the planning of learning episodes that have the learner at the centre.

The Let Me Learn Process thus works on multiple platforms. For the purpose of this paper we will consider two levels namely the facilitator-teacher and the learner (the recipient of learning) levels. The model below depicts the shift in the way we understand knowledge acquisition and the learning process - from a teacher focus in which the student is a passive recipient of content and passive performer of pre-packaged skills/strategies to an intentional performer, an active learner who is involved in meta-analysis of the compatibility between the task and his/her own (the learner) approach to learning . Here learning is highlighted and moved to the frontal consciousness level so as to affectively and intentionally be dealt with.

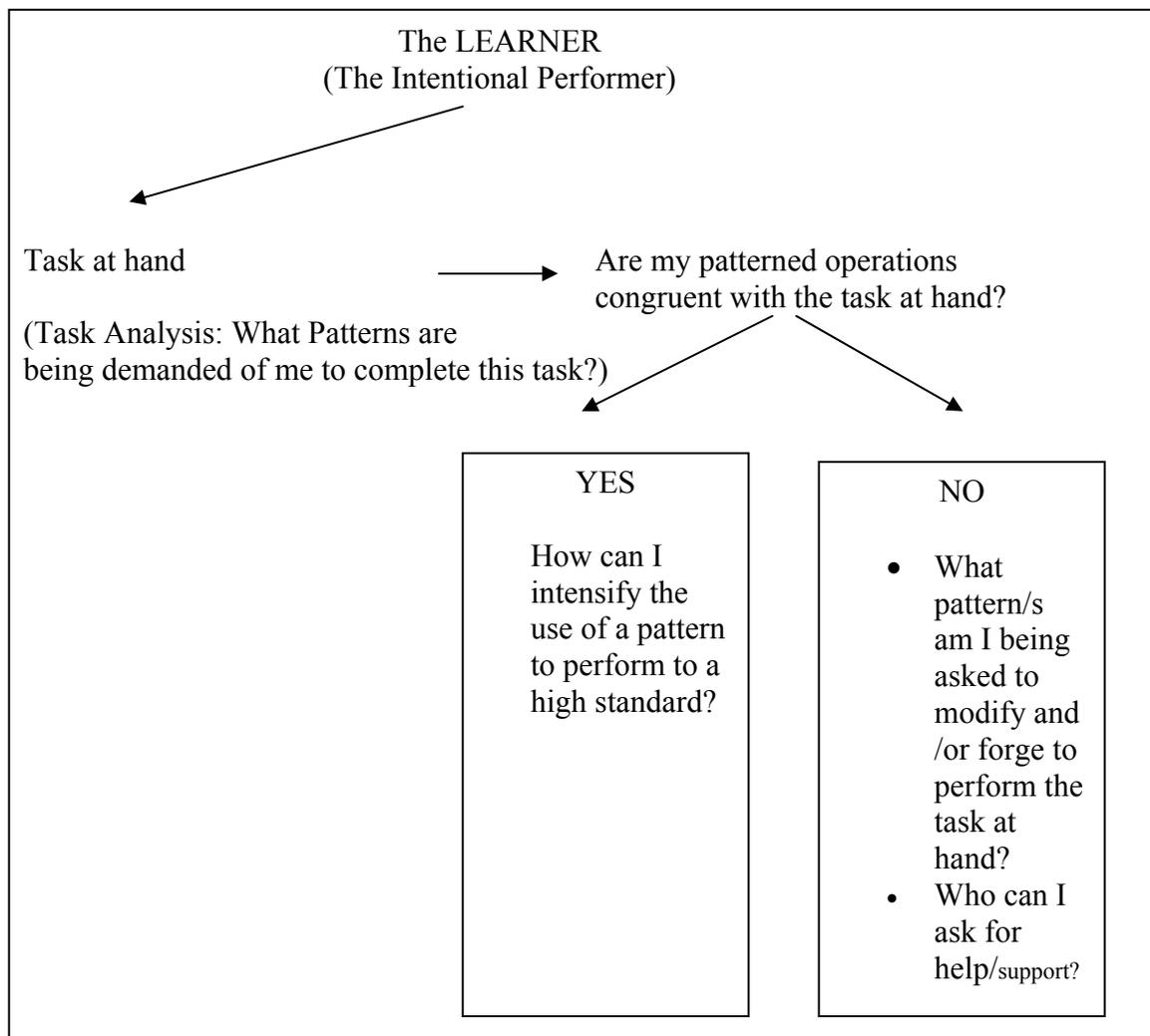


**CHART 1**

The model above also shows how the teacher's beliefs and assumptions about learning, and specifically about how a specific learning episode can be taught are brought to the awareness level and analysed in light of the learner's profile within the classroom. This

paradigm of learning emphasizes the role of the learner as an active participant - an intentional performer.

The second model depicts how when the teacher's intentional consciousness allows space for the intentional learning process, the learner is equipped with metacognitive tools to analyse the patterns demanded by the task at hand and use "their neurologically anchored patterned operations by consciously/reflectively tethering those that are too strong for the given learning task and extending or forging those that the task calls for in a higher range" (Osterman and Kottkamp,2004 p.173).



**CHART 2**

Maria, has been a teacher since 1990 at a small rural village in the south of Malta. This school caters for 500 students and has 19 mixed-ability classes, 12 primary and 7 kindergarten classes. This is how Maria expressed her experience of her first day of work:

*“Teach in a school in the south of Malta! You’re completely crazy,” a friend warned me. “You’ll ruin your career.”*

*I was taken back. “What do you mean “ruin my career?”*

*“When you’ve decided you’ve had enough, and apply for a job in a better school, you’ll be labeled as a “state south” teacher. Be smart – get out before you get in.”*

*But I wanted to work with primary school children and teaching jobs were available here.*

*I graduated in the early 1990s. I walked to my first day of work at school with theory, slogans, cliché words, ideal practice in my mind. My new Head Teacher told me she thought I’d made the right choice. She welcomed me to the ranks of primary teachers, leading me to her office saying, “Just call me Joan.” I relaxed immediately.*

*In her mid-fifties, she had a disarming grin and a thick lock of grey hair that looked strangely out of character. A china mug on her desk read “I’m the Boss.” It was clear that the mug was a joke. “The excellent grade I see in your Degree Certificate won’t matter much here,” she began. “This is the real world.” She leaned over the desk. “I only have one criterion for appraising new teachers. Every child in this school, and I mean each one, has the right to be loved. No matter, how difficult the child is, no matter how he or she drives you crazy from the very first day..... give them all the love and affection you can. When it feels too impossible, come and see me and we’ll talk. All right Maria? Now good luck, and we’ll see you in the morning.”*

*Later I ventured into the kitchen, the only space available as a staff room. Several teachers were crammed into the tiny room, dutifully cleaning up the coffee mugs. I introduced myself*

*“We heard you were coming” answered a voice near the sink. A big, strong looking man came over and introduced himself as the school assistant head, Joe. I shook his hand, which was still dripping with dish water. “I suppose you’ll manage just fine,” he said, as he looked me over. “You’ve got youth on your side at least....doesn’t she Jane?” An elderly woman with a friendly smile came over and gave me a pat on the shoulder.*

*“Just keep yourself in shape and you’ll survive, young lady. Look how long I’ve lasted. I’ve been at this game for over forty years.”*

*My classroom is a “squarish” building on the first floor of the school. The inside was hot and lifeless. An old fashioned roller blind filtered the summer sun, shining a dead green light over the empty desks. There was only one picture on the wall: a washed out, glue-streaked poster advocating bird life. A wounded bird was covered with blood whilst miserably asking “Why?” The desks and chairs of my class were scattered all over the classroom, some of them looked like they had been collected from the old school storehouse. The blackboard was in such poor condition that you almost had to chisel letters on it.*

*I can’t recall many details from my first days of actually working with my pupils. I tried to ignore their individual differences and treat them as one giant, uniform mass. I felt that if I lumped them into a single personality, I would be less overwhelmed.”* (Abstract from her teaching journal)

This is indeed how many novice teachers experience their first encounter with the reality of teaching. Often as Bezzina and Portelli (2005) study show, ‘(B)eginning teachers commonly state that they are unprepared for both the workload, and the social problems’. The ‘reality shock’ described in Veenman (1984) leads teachers to ‘the concept of homogeneity,...(in which) the idea that one can create homogenous groups of learners by using performance and ability to stream students into different classrooms or schools’ (Borg and Calleja, 2006, 147) often leads teachers to viewing the class as ‘*single personality*’. This leads teachers satisfied with teacher-centred, rote-learning methods that target training for performance in examinations and tests.

It is only through reflective practice in which teachers critically reflect on the strategies and methods they use and face the illusion they themselves create, that a transformation can come about. But encountering reality without having alternative means will only lead to frustration. Here Maria saw in the Let Me Learn in-service training a place where ‘*I could ask how and why our learning gets constructed the way it does*’. The Let Me Learn in-service training programme in her words ‘*changed me both as a teacher and as a person*’. It gave her the possibility to start ‘*looking at my pupils as learners functioning as active persons committed to self and social empowerment. Equally important, it gave me strength and showed me new directions that could allow me to make serious inroads in school reform efforts...*’

The teacher here experienced the LML process as a process of creative changes brought about in her methodology, from one that simply sees herself as a transmitter of knowledge to one in which ‘*pupils construct their own versions of knowledge and through an array of interactive strategies pupils make meaning from their educational experience to embody a constructivist approach.*’

This is how Maria experienced the LML process:

*‘The LML process begins almost immediately with data gathering. Through the use of the Learning Connections Inventory (LCI), I gather information about myself as learner and about my pupils. In a collaborative and supportive setting, I learn more about my pupils through activities and discussions. As I analyse this information, I develop an understanding of the class learning patterns.*

*As a teacher, I believe that the LCI plays a particularly valuable role in the LML process because it facilitates the identification of those important underlying theories-in-use about learning. It is a powerful tool to tap and measure the strength of the patterns directly.*

*I also gather information about pupils through observation and through LCI. Pupils gather information about their own behaviour as learners through systematic data (the LCI), direct observation (experiential activities) and reflective assessment (journaling). Observational opportunities are broad and deep, and they take place continuously throughout the process, supplementing and enriching the ongoing analysis.*

*Using tools like the Word Wall, I also gather information about the requirements of various learning tasks and again assess the pupils’ own combination learning patterns. This knowledge is an important prelude to developing more successful teaching strategies (Osterman and Kothamp 2004:79). As partners in the education process, pupils, teachers and parents grow in understanding of how to align strategies with the requirements needed for successful accomplishment of various tasks. In short, everything and anything related to learning that is observed becomes a potential opportunity for analysis, and every analysis generates the potential for additional behaviour and data collection.’ (Abstract from her teaching journal)*

Through this new self-awareness, Maria could inform her planning with substantial information about the class profile. She could see that:

*‘The majority of pupils in my class use Sequence frequently so they require a substantive content, clear and complete directions and few to no changes once tasks are given. It helps when I do modeling of activities whilst providing samples of the work product that I am seeking, as this alleviates some of the pupils’ anxiousness or frustration they may feel when faced with tasks.*

*Having a high number of students who use Sequence frequently, I do a regular thoughtful check of how clear and consistent I am with my directions when I give class work. These children, overall, want a plan and want to be as organised as possible.*

*My high Precision and high Sequence may lead me to give out a lot of detailed information and a lot of importance to organisation. I usually fail to address the technical students. This is an area of self improvement in my teaching methods. I am very cautious that due to my pupils' moderate low use of Confluence, they may feel uncomfortable with a necessary but too sudden change class activity or assignment.'*

She could also problematise her teaching strategies in light of this profile thus while giving the children the opportunity to reflect on different patterns, she could help them strategize through first modeling through taking on 'a guiding and questioning role, often necessitating the use of the learners' mother tongue, to encourage them to reflect on their basic assumptions about learning. By doing this, I model the types of questions about the learning patterns that pupils will gradually learn to ask themselves.' The teacher could now appreciate the importance of combining metacognitive information with a cognitive approach (Clarke 2001:12):

*'For example, in order to get children to learn a group of new words the teacher might ask them to sort them into groups (the sequence pattern used in the cognitive strategy of sorting). However, there is little point in children doing this if they do not realise why they are doing it. In other words, the reflective dimension (the metacognitive strategy of decoding how to tackle the task and evaluating it afterwards) is missing. In addition, some children may find other learning patterns more effective such as copying words, associating words with pictorial images, repeating words and so on.'*

This in-service training also helped Maria to understand Karol, a pupil in her class who she describes in these words:

*'One of the more colourful characters in my class was a seven-year old named Karol. Hated and feared – sometimes loved – Karol literally ran the school, a role he played with the talent of an artist. He was a master technician when it came to creating his own image. At a moment's notice he can become Leader, Fighter, Revenger, Champion, King of the Corridor. Everything and everyone was a point of reference for his act.*

*The teachers and the school administration treated Karol with a subtle defense. Any attempt at confrontation made them nervous. He was only seven, but he could immobilize you with a glance, quickening the breath, causing the heart to pound.*

*He was a foreign boy, adopted by a Maltese family. Unfortunately, this boy was encountering hard family problems. Feelings of rejectedness were transforming this boy in a rebel within his environment. In class, he could not sit down for one single moment. One day in November, just after a school lottery activity, the boy felt very bad because his number was not drawn. He turned suddenly and punched a girl on her forehead. The girl went unconscious and the school had to*

*call for the hospital assistance. In a few words, the boy was the “uncontrollable” of the school.*

*After a few weeks of trying to teach Karol according to the school syllabus and the approaches I had been using in my class teaching, I knew that I would either have to change my entire approach or sacrifice my stomach. My health had been suffering...” (Abstract from her teaching journal)*

Maria introduced journal writing to her class (an idea which she picked up from the Malta Writing workshop) and Karol bought a small diary, ‘*I can still remember the black and white prints of this diary. He never bothered to bring anything to school with him. One can say that this “diary” was the exception.*’ The teacher understanding the child’s combination of learning patterns could strategize and give the child the possibility to express himself, his feelings on something which he owned and considered his:

*‘The writing process in a diary, based on precision and confluence, provided the child and the teacher with a “tool” for communication – something which was lacking and which was causing a lot of rebellion and aggression. For the first time, Karol was using his pencil to write in his diary. His sentences were poorly structured, grammatically incorrect and difficult to read and to understand. However, the very “act” of writing, based on his prominent learning patterns, was quieting down the child. His face could be seen relieved. He fixed his eyes on his writings for quite a long time. Often I could see him smiling at his diary.’*

The child himself expresses this new freedom in one of his entries where he writes:

*“I’m feeling a lot better these days. Writing gives me an unusual feeling inside me. It’s like somebody else comes inside my body. I can talk, joke and cry with my diary.”*

In a note he put in his diary for the teacher he wrote:

*“Dear Miss. I have something to tell you. I want to tell you that I love you. I not only love you because you are my teacher. I love you and I respect you. I love you like a mother not just because you teacher. But I wish that I had the heart to tell you that I love you other than this letter.”*

*Yours truly,  
Karol*

The above written words coming from a child who was at great risk of being rejected by the same system that was trying to educate him is truly a relief. This teacher with her awareness of yet another possibility of reaching out has succeeded to bring to this child new hope.

In her words ‘*The Let Me Learn process helped me as a teacher to find better ways of making my classroom a vital place for all my pupils – a place where*

*pupils can be empowered to gain a sense of control over their destinies rather than they feel trapped by their lack of knowledge or social status.'*

## Conclusion

The growth experienced by this teacher is evident. Other teachers have reported similar experiences of improved intentionality in the choice of appropriate strategies of success. In using LML this teacher has gained more skill in analyzing tasks and students' needs and demands through a metacognitive reflective process and applying personalized responsive strategies.

The child improved conception of the learning environment and motivation to behave better and perform in academic tasks is also noted. This new understanding of his learning processes and the ability to express his inner feelings in writing has resulted in better behaviour and as a result better academic performance.

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