

# Sorting Out the Self-Esteem Controversy

*In the '90s, the question is not whether schools should enhance students' self-esteem, but how they propose to do so.*

JAMES A. BEANE

The idea of enhancing self-esteem seems innocent enough to most people. Common sense suggests that those who have positive self-esteem are likely to lead satisfying lives while those who do not are just as likely to find life dissatisfying and unhappy. Yet, like so many other seemingly commonsensical things, the idea of self-esteem has become a source of considerable controversy and contention in the school context. So it is that, as we enter the 1990s, another "great debate" is emerging. This one is about whether schools ought to try to enhance self-esteem and, if so, how, on what grounds, and to what extent?

That the school might play a role in the development of self-esteem is not a recent idea. It has been part of educational thinking for most of this century, particularly since the 1960s, when many educators came to realize that affect in general and self-esteem specifically loom large in school life.<sup>1</sup> But it was in the 1980s that self-esteem was catapulted into educational policy thinking. It became linked not only to academic achievement but also to substance abuse, antisocial acts, adolescent pregnancy, suicide, and other self-destructive behaviors. The theory was this: people, including the young, will not hurt themselves if they like themselves. Moreover, if they have self-confidence, they are more likely to do well at whatever they might try to do.

This theory has driven many states

and school districts to add development of self-esteem to their list of goals. It also served as the underlying theme of the notorious California self-esteem project that simultaneously appealed to the most humane impulses of some while offending the Puritan streak of self-denial that still runs deep in the values of others.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, in the schools, the terrain is cluttered with conflicting and contradictory theories about self-esteem and ways to enhance it. The purpose of this article is to sort out this "mess" and to make some sense out of the idea of enhancing self-esteem in schools.

## Why Enhance Self-Esteem?

The argument for enhancing self-esteem in schools follows three lines of reasoning. The first speaks to the school's role as a social agency that is meant to contribute to the general health and well-being of young people. We are living in very complex times. This is the age of discontinuity and disbelief, of ambiguity and ambivalence. As difficult as it is for so many adults to find anything to hang on to, we can only imagine what this age looks like through the eyes of young people who typically lack the resources that are available to most adults. The litany of statistics about self-destructive tendencies such as substance abuse, crime, and suicide must surely be seen as a signal from young people that many do

not find much about themselves to like. The idea of enhancing self-esteem becomes a moral imperative for schools, especially in a time when other social institutions and agencies seem unwilling or unable to provide support and encouragement in the process of growing up.

The second line of reasoning is found within the school itself. When we look at the growing collection of studies on self-esteem, we find a persistent correlation between it and such school concerns as participation, completion, self-direction, and various types of achievement.<sup>3</sup> This last correlation, between self-esteem and achievement, is a driving force in the growing interest in self-esteem. Nonetheless, it is widely misunderstood. The correlation is relatively weak when global self-esteem is involved but strong when self-esteem is situation-specific, as in the case, for example, of self-esteem in mathematics, reading, physical education, or some other area.<sup>4</sup> This link between self-esteem and school concerns ought to persuade those who have trouble with the moral argument that they, too, have a vested interest in enhancing self-esteem.

The third line of reasoning is less often used, yet more powerful. It extends the idea of personal development beyond coping with problems and into personal efficacy or power, which, in turn, may lead toward action.<sup>5</sup> Only the most ignorant or arrogant could fail to see that we face increasing problems with inequitable distribution of wealth, power, and justice. Conditions like racism, sexism, poverty, and homelessness detract from human dignity and for that reason debilitate one of its central features, self-esteem. The resolution of these issues will depend less on rhetoric and more on action, but action is not likely unless people believe they can



Jessie Degroot

make a difference.

When looked at this way, enhancing self-esteem helps build the personal and collective efficacy that helps us out of the morass of inequity that plagues us. Needless to say, the hint of social reconstructionism in this line of reasoning may account for its absence in most of the rhetoric of the self-esteem movement. Nevertheless it is a powerful argument for the schools, which have a responsibility to extend democracy, human dignity, and cultural diversity throughout the larger society.

### Versions of Self-Esteem in School

Over the past few decades, the idea of enhancing self-esteem in schools has become increasingly popular. True, many school officials have questioned the idea by contending they have enough on their hands, with the deluge

of mandates coming down from state legislatures, without having to take on issues that ought to be addressed by the home and other "socializing" agencies. Certainly not all of these people are uncaring toward young people; often they speak out of frustration over multiplying demands placed upon the school and taking the flack for any lack of progress on these demands. Even so, such protests have diminished as the evidence linking self-esteem and school success has grown.

Now the issue is not *whether* the schools should try to enhance the self-esteem of young people, but *how*. It is here that we encounter the cluttered terrain of conflicting and contradictory methods for enhancing self-esteem. There are three main approaches that account for most efforts in this area.

The first approach follows from personal development activities, such as sensitivity training, that enjoyed some

*The link between self-esteem, achievement, and a sense of personal efficacy is tipping the balance in favor of a curriculum that will enhance students' self-esteem, yet there is no simple formula for achieving such a goal.*

popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s. To envision how this approach is practiced, we might picture a teacher and a group of students sitting in a circle talking about how much they like themselves and everyone else for 20 minutes on a Wednesday afternoon. Such activities are like parlor games of pop psychology and, no doubt, have about the same momentary effects in real life. Saying "I like myself and others" in front of a group is not necessarily the same as actually feeling that way, especially if I am only doing it because I am supposed to. Being nice has a place in enhancing self-esteem, but it is not enough.

The second approach involves putting young people through a self-esteem pro-

---

---

**Saying "I like myself  
and others" in front  
of a group is not  
necessarily the same  
as actually feeling that  
way, especially if I am  
only doing it because  
I am supposed to.**

---

gram or course offered in a set-aside time slot during the school day. Here the teacher comes armed with more than good feelings, namely a self-esteem "curriculum," locally prepared or commercially purchased, assuring that students who go through the program will have better self-esteem and thus be immune to self-destructive behaviors and school failure. In 1970 Weinstein and Fantini estimated that there were at least 350 such programs with about 3,000 "affective exercises and techniques."<sup>6</sup> The number may be greater now, although I estimate that about 30 are widely known and used.<sup>7</sup> That schools would buy a package to enhance self-esteem is not surprising when we remember that the commodification of the self was an idea promoted in the 1980s. If "we are what we buy," then perhaps we can also buy our way into self-esteem.

The "self-esteem program" approach suffers from two problems, one practical and the other conceptual. Hartshorne and May, in the late 1920s, showed that direct instruction in course-like settings does not produce lasting or strong effects in the affective domain.<sup>8</sup> While their research focused on character education, similar conclusions were drawn more recently by Lockwood and others in reviewing studies on values clarification and moral development.<sup>9</sup> Aside from glowing testimonials by participants (which cannot be completely disregarded) after self-esteem programs, there is scant evidence to warrant claims made by program developers.

Current research suggests that one area in which packaged programs evidence little short-term gain is "self in school."<sup>10</sup> This may seem hard to believe when we remember that such programs are sponsored and taught in schools by school personnel. Yet why would we expect otherwise if there is no guarantee that anyone in any other place in the school will care much about newfound self-esteem, personal goals, or decision-making skills?

Beyond that, self-esteem programs suffer from a conceptual problem that they share with most personal development programs. Their underlying theory is that to enhance self-esteem we must go inside individuals and encourage them to push ahead with confidence, even in the face of difficult odds. Such an inside-out approach ignores the fact that in the balance of interactions between the individual and the environment out of which self-esteem grows, the environment is almost inevitably more powerful. If we want to enhance self-esteem, we must first check to see whether the social environment is safe for the individual. A debilitating environment is likely to squash fledgling self-confidence no matter how much we exhort the individual to persist. We may all know individuals who have defied this rule, but the fact that we can name them suggests they are the exception rather than the rule.

Since the environment powerfully informs their self-perceptions, insisting that young people are responsible for their own self-esteem is blatantly unjust. Moreover, suggesting that self-esteem can be preserved by developing "coping skills" endorses the status quo and, in so doing, ignores the fact that having positive self-esteem is almost impossible for many young people, given the deplorable conditions under which they are forced to live by the inequities in our society.

The third approach to enhancing self-esteem in school recognizes the power

of the environment and searches for possibilities across the whole institution.<sup>11</sup> Every nook and cranny in the school has the potential to enhance or debilitate self-esteem. For example, a school that enhances self-esteem could be characterized by a humanistic and democratic climate, student participation in governance, heterogeneous grouping, and positive expectations. In the areas of curriculum and teaching, a premium would be placed upon collaborative teacher-student planning, cooperative learning, thematic units that emphasize personal and social meanings, student self-evaluation, multicultural content, community service projects, and activities that involve making, creating, and "doing." This approach also emphasizes the need to enhance adults' self-esteem, particularly teachers', since it is unlikely they can contribute to positive self-esteem in young people if their own is negative.

Proponents of this third approach recognize that even our most salutary efforts in the area of self-esteem are threatened by poor conditions outside the school. To what extent can we expect progress within the school to stand up in the face of poverty, homelessness, racism, sexism, and ageism? Hence, we must place the larger community and society under the same scrutiny as the school, so that we may see what work is needed there.

### **The Great Self-Esteem Debate**

Recently the argument over which approach to use in enhancing self-esteem has been overshadowed by a much larger debate concerning the assumption that positive self-esteem is necessary for school achievement. Three factors fuel this debate. First, it seems that while young people in South Korea and Japan score higher than those in the United States on international comparison tests in mathematics, the U.S. students come out on top in measures of self-esteem.<sup>12</sup> Second, there has been considerable backlash against the California task force report on self-esteem, which is

---

---

## If schooling for self-esteem does not simultaneously address other aspects of affect as well as cognition, it is incomplete and artificial.

---

seen by many people as an unsupported statement of New Age, pop psychology "fluff."<sup>13</sup> Third, the present Conservative Restoration in education and elsewhere rings with the rhetoric of self-denial that those of the New Right believe is necessary for "repairing" the "frayed" moral fabric of society.<sup>14</sup> Put together, these factors make a superficially convincing argument against the usual view of enhancing self-esteem, yet one that can be packaged in neat slogans like the title of a *Time* magazine commentary, "Education: Doing Bad and Feeling Good."<sup>15</sup>

However, when this rhetoric is examined, its transparency is revealed. For example, I asked some South Korean, Japanese, and Chinese educators to explain how they might account for the inverse correlation between self-esteem and mathematics scores reported from the international comparisons of achievement. Their uncomplicated answer was this: "In our cultures it is impolite to say one can do well, even if one thinks so." While this is not evidence to end the argument, it at least raises the question of whether United States' students are arrogant incompetents or victims of criticism based upon culturally embedded differences in educational findings.<sup>16</sup>

As for the other two factors, we might easily write off the first as an interpretation of a report (that of the California Task Force) that represents a sometimes unclear vision of enhancing self-esteem<sup>17</sup> and the second as another piece of the belt-tightening rhetoric of 1980s educational "reform." We might further ask when and how young people were excluded from the right to be happy. And one might facetiously suggest that the international tests indicate that we who value self-esteem are doing a good job with it while those enamored with academic achievement are not pulling their weight. These criticisms should not be taken so lightly, however, because they have deeper implications.

First, by focusing only on the pop psychology school of enhancing self-es-

teem, these criticisms ignore other versions which are quite different from it. In so doing, the very idea of self-esteem enhancement is threatened by the same red-flag mentality that fails to differentiate between the cross-curriculum values clarification theory and the collections of cute activities, like the venerable "lifeboat" simulation, that ruined its reputation.

Even more dangerous is the kind of statement made by critic Mike Schmoker: "Self-esteem, as it is now used, isn't something earned, but given."<sup>18</sup> The fact is that it is neither. In its practical form, self-esteem is personally constructed out of interactions with the environment; in other words, it is learned. At a conceptual level self-esteem is a central feature in human dignity and thus an inalienable human entitlement.<sup>19</sup> As such, schools and other agencies have a moral obligation to help build it and avoid debilitating it. The "no pain, no gain" metaphor may be justified in the weight room, but it is dangerous in human development, especially when pain is already inequitably distributed and gain so inequitably accessible. The failure to recognize the obligation to enhance self-esteem works harshly against all young people, but particularly so against those in our society who are least privileged.

So that I do not seem to be imagining this last point, another illustration from the self-esteem critics might be helpful. One of the more obvious ways to con-

tribute to clear self-concept and positive self-esteem is to expand curriculum content in ways that include the stories of diverse cultures so that more young people can see themselves as part of what is valued in the school's curriculum. Yet Kräuthammer, for example, extends his concern about self-esteem enhancement into an attack on multicultural inclusion in the curriculum.

Among other things, he claims "there is little to be said . . . about the contribution of women to the Bill of Rights."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps so, but there is much to be said about why; and young people, especially women, should not be denied the opportunity to find out. Nor should all young people, especially Native Americans, be left ignorant of the influence of the "Great Law of the Iroquois" on early documents of white, United States democracy like the Articles of Confederation and the Bill of Rights.<sup>21</sup> Criticism of multicultural education and its connection to self-esteem is a thinly veiled version of the Eurocentric arrogance that has marred schools and is unbecoming in a culturally diverse society.

I believe that the "Great Debate" over self-esteem at this level should be seen for exactly what it is: a part of the tug-of-war between the long line of progressive efforts to create humane schools and the new Conservative Restoration that grew up in the 1980s. The latter is not a unidimensional movement. It is a package that involves interrelated interests of economic utilitarianism, classical Eurocentric humanism, and old-line "get tough" pedagogy. There is little room for the idea of enhancing self-esteem beyond its relation to individual achievement, especially as it is broadly defined in the context of personal efficacy and the resolution of large social inequities. This package marginalizes the same nonprivileged young people upon whom the schools have always worked most harshly and continues the unjust status they have historically been assigned.

In saying this, I do not mean to glorify or over-romanticize the self-esteem "movement." Many of those involved

---

---

## **It is not enough that young people like themselves. They must also have a sense that what they say, and think, and do counts for something.**

---

in it still fail to differentiate between self-concept (the description of self) and self-esteem (the evaluation of self) or to understand the intricate role played by values in self-esteem judgments.<sup>22</sup> Efforts to improve self-perceptions must contribute to the quality of all three dimensions. For example, multicultural education and cooperative learning have as much to do with expanding the concept of self and promoting the value of interdependence as they do with self-esteem. Critics such as those cited above apparently do not understand this, but their analyses seem all the more accurate when people inside the schools also do not.

Moreover, as I have pointed out, the self-esteem movement is still full of the kind of fluff and radical individualism that is as threatening to authentic progressivism as the conservative restoration. In fact, the overly individualistic tendencies of many self-esteem programs and projects play right into the hands of that restoration by focusing on self-protection mechanisms rather than the environment that creates their need. This is, of course, "privatizing" at its extreme. It is a theory of alienation that pits the individual against the world.

### **Beyond the "Mess"**

In retrospect, it may seem ironic that the idea of enhancing self-esteem would become a buzzword amidst the hardening of academic categories in the 1980s. As we have seen, however, this should not be surprising since that idea has many different meanings, some of which fit rather well with the Horatio Alger reform notions in the last decade. The important question now focuses on what we will do to find our way out of the confusion and contradiction that has arisen.

I suggest that we stop seeing self-esteem only in individualistic terms and move instead toward an integrated view of self and social relations. This transition would involve at least three main parts. First, the construction of personal

meanings should be understood as emerging from interactions with the environment. Self-perceptions are a central feature of human personality from which flow many social manifestations, but environment powerfully informs self-perceptions. Moreover, it is clear that people do not learn about themselves either apart from or prior to learning about their world. Rather, they learn about both simultaneously and in light of their interdependence.

Second, self-esteem is properly seen as one dimension of the larger concept of affect that also involves values, morals, ethics, character, and the like, and is connected to cognition. By itself, self-esteem addresses only part of what Dewey called the "affective-ideational" connection that underlies social relations.<sup>23</sup> When we make self-esteem decisions, we do so on the basis of our values.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, such decisions involve thinking; they may be more or less thoughtful, but they are not empty of thought.<sup>25</sup> Thus, if schooling for self-esteem does not simultaneously address other aspects of affect as well as cognition, it is incomplete and artificial.

Third, self-esteem alone is an incomplete definition of the concept of human dignity upon which work on self-esteem is partly justified. It is not enough that young people like themselves. They must also have a sense that what they say, and think, and do counts for something. In other words, self-esteem must be accompanied by a sense of personal efficacy. But even that is not enough.

Individuals do not live in isolation, and to imply such is dangerous. Personal efficacy must be connected to collective efficacy so that individuals see themselves as part of groups that can and do have meaning and power. In making this point, I am connecting the idea of enhancing self-esteem to the broader themes of democracy, human dignity, and cultural diversity—themes that ostensibly permeate the lives of those in our society.<sup>26</sup>

What does this mean for schools' role in enhancing self-esteem? It means they must place a premium on authentic participation, collaborative action, a problem-centered curriculum, and interdependent diversity. Likewise, they should work to remove policies and practices that can debilitate self-esteem like tracking, autocratic procedures, uncultural curriculum, and competition.

This kind of effort is not without controversy. After all, it suggests that people not only feel good about themselves, but also come to believe they can change things. Perhaps it is here that the gatekeepers of the school as well as the advocates of the conservative restoration sense the real problem with self-esteem. Perhaps it is here, too, that we may understand the individualistic "coping strategies" of packaged programs as something of a failure of nerve. Work with self-esteem that promotes integration of self and social interests *and* personal and social efficacy offers the possibility that young people will challenge the status quo, not simply accept it. Besides, the very idea of packaged programs seems largely inappropriate for any genuine work with self-esteem.

In the end we are faced with some very serious challenges. Finding our way out of the self-esteem "mess" must begin with several understandings. First, being nice is surely a part of this effort, but it is not enough. Second, there is a place for some direct instruction regarding affective matters, but this is not enough either. Self-esteem and affect are not simply another school

## Clearly, enhancing self-esteem is not the soft or simple work that so many people believe it to be.

subject to be placed in set-aside time slots. Third, the negative affect of "get tough" policies is not a promising route to self-esteem and efficacy. This simply blames young people for problems that are largely not of their own making. Fourth, since self-perceptions are powerfully informed by culture, comparing self-esteem across cultures without clarifying cultural differences is distracting and unproductive.

Authentic work in the area of self-esteem is more complex than most people, including participants in the great debate, have been willing to admit. It involves broadening our understanding of the reasons behind such work, extending the definition of self-esteem into a larger concept of affect that integrates self and social interests, extending self-enhancement efforts across the entire school, and relating the work of the school with the larger world of conditions that detract from human dignity. Self-esteem is not just a psychological construct. It also has meaning for creating and understanding the philosophical and sociological themes that permeate our lives. Clearly, enhancing self-esteem is not the soft or simple work that so many people believe it to be.

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, A. W. Combs, ed., (1962), *Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming: A New Focus for Education*, (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development).
- <sup>2</sup> California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, (1990), *Toward a State of Esteem*, (Sacramento: State of California). The report was supplemented by a larger volume: A. M. Mecca, N. S. Smelser, and J. Vasconellos, (1989), *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*, (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, W. W. Purkey, (1970), *Self-Concept and School Achievement*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall); M. Rosenberg, (1979), *Conceiving the Self*, (New York: Basic Books); and J. A.

- Beane and R. P. Lipka, (1986), *Self-Concept, Self-Esteem and the Curriculum*, (New York: Teachers College Press).
- <sup>4</sup> B. M. Byrne, (1984), "The General/Academic Self-Concept Nomological Network: A Review of Construct Validation Research," *Review of Educational Research* 54: 427-456.
- <sup>5</sup> J. A. Beane, (1990), *Affect in the Curriculum: Toward Democracy, Dignity, and Diversity*, (New York: Teachers College Press).
- <sup>6</sup> G. Weinstein and M. D. Fantini, (1970), *Toward Humanistic Education: A Curriculum of Affect*, (New York: Praeger).
- <sup>7</sup> A content analysis of many of these is included in A. M. Kaiser-Carlso, (1986), *A Program Description and Analysis of Self-Esteem Programs for the Junior High School*, (Santa Clara, Calif.: Educational Development Center).
- <sup>8</sup> H. Hartshorne and M. A. May, (1928, 1929, 1930, respectively), *Studies in the Nature of Character: Volume I: Studies in Deceit, Volume II: Studies in Service and Self-Control, Volume III* (with F. K. Shuttleworth): *Studies in the Organization of Character*, (New York: Macmillan.)
- <sup>9</sup> See, for example, A. L. Lockwood, (1978), "The Effects of Values Clarification and Moral Development Curricula on School-Age Subjects: A Critical Review of Research," *Review of Educational Research* 48: 325-64; J. S. Leming, (1981), "Curricular Effectiveness in Value/Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 10: 147-64.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, P. E. Crisci, (1986), "The Quest National Center: A Focus on Prevention of Alienation," *Phi Delta Kappan* 67: 440-42.
- <sup>11</sup> See, for example, Beane and Lipka, op. cit.
- <sup>12</sup> C. Krauthammer, (February 5, 1990), "Education: Doing Bad and Feeling Good,"

*Time*, p. 78.

- <sup>13</sup> See, for example, J. Leo, (April 2, 1990), "The Trouble With Self-Esteem," *U.S. News and World Report*, p. 16. The California report was also a target, on these same grounds, of *Doonesbury* cartoonist Gary Trudeau.
- <sup>14</sup> See B. Ehrenreich, (1989), *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, (New York: Random House). Ehrenreich argues that self-denial is a persistent theme in the rhetoric, if not the real lives, of the professional/managerial middle class.
- <sup>15</sup> Krauthammer, op. cit.
- <sup>16</sup> This same critique might be aimed at most of the reactive instruments typically used to "measure" self-esteem since the statements that make up the instruments reflect the values of their developer(s) and not necessarily those of the young people who are subjected to them.
- <sup>17</sup> In what may have been anticipation of this criticism, the California Task Force expanded its work to include the connection of self-esteem to personal and social responsibility.
- <sup>18</sup> M. Schmoker, (January-February 1990), "Self-Esteem Is Earned, Not Learned," newsletter of the Thomas Jefferson Center, pp. 1 ff.
- <sup>19</sup> Beane, op. cit.
- <sup>20</sup> Krauthammer, op. cit.
- <sup>21</sup> D. Griende, (1988), "It Is Time to Take Away the Veil," *Northeast Indian Quarterly* 4 and 5: 28-34. Two Iroquois ideas that the framers of the white documents of democracy "forgot" were equality of women and the prohibition of slavery.
- <sup>22</sup> J. A. Beane and R. P. Lipka, "Self-Concept and Self-Esteem: A Construct Differentiation," *Child Study Journal* 10: 1-6.
- <sup>23</sup> J. Dewey, (1939), *Theory of Valuation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- <sup>24</sup> Beane and Lipka, op. cit.
- <sup>25</sup> Beane, op. cit.
- <sup>26</sup> For further discussion of these ideas, see Beane, op. cit.

**James A. Beane** is a Professor in the National College of Education at National-Louis University, Evanston, Ill. He can be reached at 928 West Shore Dr., Madison, WI 53715.

Copyright © 1991 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.