

Abandon Obsession with Self-Esteem

How meaningful is it that Japanese students score highest in mathematics while U.S. students lead in measures of self-esteem? Does learning suffer in the United States because too much emphasis is put on self-esteem?

In "Sorting Out the Self-Esteem Controversy" (September 1991), James A. Beane perpetuates the blind hope that such questions will go away.

In an attempt to make the connection between high self-esteem and high achievement, he reports that Japanese educators tell him that Japanese students may seem to have low self-esteem only because in their culture "it is impolite to say that one can do well, even if one thinks so." This underreporting of self-esteem (or is it overpoliteness in response to questions from a researcher on self-esteem) leads Beane to his unsubstantiated conclusion that self-esteem and learning must be related.

Isn't it time for us to seriously question our obsession with self-esteem?

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Reply: Score Wars Not the Point

Professor Itzkowitz implies that I want to abandon knowledge and skills in favor of self-esteem. Rather, I think we can have both.

Further, I have trouble with the idea that young people ought to base their self-esteem on standardized test scores. I disagree, too, with the theory that research on self-esteem is important simply because of its well-established correlation to academic achievement.

My point is one that both critics and advocates of attention to self-esteem

often miss: self-esteem is an aspect of human dignity—and schools have a moral obligation to seek its enhancement. Not only is the emotional well-being of youngsters more important than score wars, but knowledge and skills are important for their contribution to personal and social efficacy rather than for their value to politicians, academicians, and test publishers.

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Defeatist Mood in Education?

As a mathematician interested in helping California proceed toward the "tops-in-2000 goal" in math and science, I reviewed several issues of *Educational Leadership* to see where U.S. educators are coming from. I was surprised that recent issues barely alluded to the many efforts to make education more competitive with systems in other countries.

With the decline of the aerospace industry, early retirement will be releasing many engineers and applied scientists to facilitate the "tops-in-2000" goal. They'll be expecting to take leadership roles in schools. Equipped with M.S. and Ph.D degrees from better state universities, MIT, etc., they tend to be unimpressed with education credentials.

If rebuffed by the system (as is happening here) many may react by running for the school board and then hiring one of their own kind as a superintendent. Highly professional and accustomed to both corporate and international competition, they are more attracted to the supermarket chain than to the hierarchical model of organization familiar in public education. Chubbism ("On Local Autonomy and

School Effectiveness: A Conversation with John Chubb," December 1990) is quite appealing to them. One scientist I recently met suggested forming a national chain of junior high schools with Chubb himself as CEO, should Chubbist legislation be passed.

In light of all this, I find the tone of your publication curiously muted on this topic, compared to *Business Week* and *IEE Spectrum*—journals that report on fields where the U.S. is running 3rd or 4th instead of 15th or so as in math and sciences. Is a defeatist mood setting in—a resigned waiting for Chubbism to rescue a doomed system?

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Everyone Can Achieve Excellence If . . .

Hilliard is right on! ("Do We Have the Will to Educate All Children?" September 1991).

But no matter how wise the belief, teachers will not treat children as if every one of them can attain excellence until preservice and inservice teacher training changes. It is there where excellence is defined in terms of the standards and values of a primarily WASP middle-class culture.

We need to broaden our current definitions of excellence to go beyond letter grades, test scores, and high salaries to encompass excellence in the fine arts, communication, and athletics. Our job as educators is to assume the giftedness of every student, and then engage each in the quest for excellence in whatever areas are natural and appropriate for that student.

Second, we must focus on process and context of learning instead of setting targets for others' lives, which

invariably invites resistance and resentment from students. Human dignity can be damaged by our current emphasis on accumulation and memorization of content.

Third, we need to remember the principles of human rhythm and readiness that transcend predetermined timelines for students at particular stages. We must develop more respect for variables that affect how and when a student learns a particular skill and abandon labels that trap students in a cycle of failure.

In short, we must focus on developing excellent human beings in addition to honoring the realities of human development.

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Community Service Not a National Goal

Barbara Lewis wrote an informative article ("Today's Kids Care About Social Action," September 1991). But the White House press release she quotes describing community service as a national goal is incorrect.

Two of the six national goals refer to citizenship in a general way. Number 3 states that "... every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy."

Number 5 reads: "Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship."

While "good citizenship, commu-

nity service, and personal responsibility" were part of the motivation behind the six goals, the actual America 2000 goals and strategies are not so stated.

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Dangers in Styles — and Streets

As an educator in the Los Angeles County Juvenile Court System, I can attest to the dangers inherent in styles of clothing, hair, and personal items ("Teenagers, Clothes, and Gang Violence," September 1991). To put it another way, "If you look like a duck, you're liable to be mistaken for a duck."

However, parents and teachers alone cannot control the onslaught of subculture that children experience in the halls of learning and during their journeys to and from school.

Nor do I agree with author Jim Burke that children from single-parent homes feel unsafe at home and therefore seek out the company of gangs. As a single mother of two teenage boys

and as a teacher of hundreds of convicted juvenile offenders, I can attest that the source of fear lies outside the home. Parents cannot accompany their children to and from school. Nor can they protect children from bullies at school. And if they did attempt to, their children would experience another kind of retaliation: put-downs by fellow students. No character-building advice given before the front door closes can help students in a world running amok with gang violence, a world where it is safer to join than to fight.

The problem isn't in the home, but it is emphatically in the community. Businesses, churches, law enforcement and community agencies need to back parents and educators, who, whether single or double, are as much at risk from the gang element as is the individual child.

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