The Self-Esteem Fraud:

Why Feel-Good Education Does Not Lead to Academic Success

By Nina H. Shokraii

Executive Summary

Which comes first, achievement or self-esteem? This question is at the heart of an important educational controversy. Traditionally, public schools have thought that students' satisfaction will follow on the heels of their academic success. In other words, children who perform well in class will consequently feel good about themselves. But more recent educational theories have reversed this logic. They say that students must secure high self-esteem before they can hope to achieve. In other words, they must feel good about themselves before they can perform well in class.

For all of its current popularity, however, self-esteem theory threatens to deny children the tools they will need in order to experience true success in school and as adults. Compelling research from around the world lends empirical proof to the traditional claim that achievement precedes self-esteem. There is, in fact, almost no correlation between low self-esteem and any number of social pathologies, including poor school performance, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy.

Black children are common targets of self-esteem theory, which in their case often goes by the name of Afrocentrism. Yet they are also some of the most vulnerable, since many of them desperately require the same basic academic skills that self-esteem theory subordinates to a shallow, feel-good classroom experience. One study has even shown that inflated self-esteem among adolescent black males can encourage violent behavior.

Schools must abandon their mindless pursuit of empty self-esteem and return to the fundamental task of helping students do their best. Traditional academic preparation best teaches children how to achieve old-fashioned academic success.

Introduction

Americans have lost confidence in their public schools. A Washington Post survey recently asked people what worries them about the future. They were given dozens of choices, from sky-high crime rates to increasing drug usage to old-fashioned economic anxiety. Of all these problems, however, Americans identified the deterioration of public schools as the country's most pressing problem. "The American educational system will get worse instead of better" feared 62 percent of them.[1]

This is not exactly a new concern. Frustrated by everything from a long-term decline in test scores to the recent rise in juvenile violence, many Americans are left scratching their heads in bewilderment. What has gone wrong? What can reverse these trends? Desperate for anything that might boost the academic achievement of their charges, many schools have turned to self-esteem theory, which says that teaching children to feel good about themselves will help them perform better as students. This pedagogical approach has begun to dislodge the more traditional emphasis on subjects like reading, writing, and arithmetic.[2]

This is fundamentally wrongheaded. There is little reason to believe self-esteem leads to academic achievement, or even that self-esteem is necessary for academic success. It is therefore crucial to delegitimize the education establishment's mindless glorification of self-esteem. As Richard Weissbourd has written, schools gripped by self-esteem theory "are, in essence, producing a generation of poorly educated adults who will lack the habits of hard work and perseverance that have historically been necessary to achieving true success."[3]

What Is Self-Esteem?

There is no shortage of ways to define self-esteem. Perhaps the simplest one is found in Webster's Dictionary, which says that self-esteem is "satisfaction with oneself."[4] The Basic Behavioral Science Task Force of the National Advisory Mental Health Council offers a fuller explanation: "Self-esteem begins to develop early in life and has been studied in children as young as seven years of age. As children learn to describe aspects of

themselves, such as their physical attributes, abilities, and preferences, they also begin to evaluate them. Researchers conclude that, contrary to intuition, individuals have not one but several views of their selves, encompassing many domains of life, such as scholastic ability, physical appearance and romantic appeal, job competence, and adequacy as a provider."[5]

Psychologists generally split self-esteem into two types: earned self-esteem and global self-esteem. The concepts of each differ in critical ways:

Earned self-esteem. This is the self-esteem that people earn through their own accomplishments -- satisfaction from having scored well on an exam, for example. The psychologist Barbara Lerner says that earned self-esteem "is based on success in meeting the tests of reality -- measuring up to standards at home and in school."[6] Earned self-esteem possesses all of the positive character traits that ought to be encouraged and applauded, because it is ultimately based on work habits.

Global self-esteem. This refers to a general sense of pride in oneself. It is not grounded in a particular skill or achievement. This means that an underachieving student can still bask in the warmth of global self-esteem, even if the door to earned self-esteem is shut. Advocates say that this feeling of self-worth will inspire academic success. The reality is different. At best, global self-esteem is meaningless. At worst, it is harmful. William Damon, an educational psychologist at Brown University, warns that heightened global self-esteem can lead children to have "an exaggerated, though empty and ultimately fragile sense of their own powers ... [or] a distrust of adult communications and self-doubt."[7]

The fundamental difference between earned self-esteem and global self-esteem rests on their concepts of academic achievement. The idea of earned self-esteem says that achievement comes first and that self-esteem follows. Global self-esteem theory -- which is more popular in schools -- says that self-esteem leads the way and achievement trails behind. Earned self-esteem, of course, can take care of itself. It will develop almost naturally when children have accomplished something worthwhile. Global self-esteem, however, is artificial. It requires active intervention on the part of teachers, parents, and other authority figures. It is more than mere encouragement -- something all children need. Instead, it involves tricking kids into thinking that anything and everything they do is praiseworthy.

Self-Esteem and Academic Success

In 1986, a group of California state legislators convinced themselves that low self-esteem was the root cause behind a variety of social and economic problems such as drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and poor school performance. Before taking this line of thinking too far, however, they decided they needed some research to back up their claims. So they established the awkwardly-titled California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. The Task Force published its findings in a book called The Social Importance of Self-Esteem. The editors might as well have called their book The Social Unimportance of Self-Esteem, however, because they found practically no connection between self-esteem and any of the behaviors they studied. As Neil Smelser noted in his introduction, "One of the disappointing aspects of every chapter in this volume ... is how low the associations between self-esteem and its consequences are in research to date."[8] Over the years, other reviewers have offered similar readings of the available research, pointing to results that are unimpressive or characterized by "massive inconsistencies and contradictions."[9] Most remarkable about the California Task Force, it was not a disinterested group of scholars. They wanted to find a link. But when their research failed to turn one up, they had the honesty to admit it.

Student Performance in Asia

Scholars focusing on the connection between high global self-esteem and academic success have run into similar barriers.[10] When psychologists Harold W. Stevenson and James W. Stigler tested the academic skills of elementary school students in Japan, Taiwan, China, and the United States, the Asian students easily outperformed their American counterparts. That came as no surprise. But when the same students were asked how they felt about their subject skills, the Americans exhibited a significantly higher self-evaluation of their academic prowess. In other words, they combined a lousy performance with a high sense of self-esteem. As Stevenson and Stigler point out, Asian schools teach their students to indulge in self-congratulation only after they have paid their dues, through years of learning and hard work. While educators in most countries frown upon pride -- one manifestation of a high self-esteem -- American teachers actually encourage it as a positive personality trait.[11]

Part of the problem, Stevenson and Stigler found, lies in American teachers' priorities in the classroom. They focus much more on sensitivity to the students' needs, whereas Asians concentrate on their ability to explain things clearly. Indeed, roughly half of the Asian teachers surveyed said that clarity is one of the most important attributes required to be a good teacher. Only 10 percent of them said that sensitivity is equally important. Given the same set of choices, American teachers reversed priorities. Moreover, American teachers avoid exposing their students' poor performance, fearing damage to their self-esteem. Japanese and Chinese teachers, on the other hand, regard mistakes as an index of what remains to be learned through persistence and increased effort. In other words, American schools worry more about how students view themselves than about their actual academic performance.

Australian researchers B.C. Hansford and J.A. Hattie scoured academic literature on the link between global self-esteem and academic achievement. And although they found a slim correlation, they also discovered that the better the research, the lower and less significant the connection. They recommended replacing efforts to boost global self-esteem with efforts to boost academic or subject-specific self-esteem -- which can only occur after students achieve academic success.[12]

Other studies show that programs created to promote self-esteem among elementary school students actually produce less of it than those designed to improve academic performance. The best research in this area evaluated a federal Head Start program to help children in grades 1-3, called Project Follow-Through. The researchers charged different schools to implement the project. To judge the effectiveness of self-esteem in underwriting academic success, they selected schools with differing philosophies of education. The models were then categorized into three major types: (1) holistically-oriented classrooms prone to promote self-esteem, (2) behaviorally-oriented models emphasizing traditional basic instruction, and (3) combination models that joined the two previous models. Researchers looked at 9,000 students on a variety of measures, from basic skills to cognitive and affective skills. The results were astounding. Students taught using the behavioral model received the highest scores not only in academics but also on self-esteem. The researchers could therefore safely conclude that programs designed to provide young children with the tools for academic success tend to be more successful as the children improve in both academic performance and self-esteem.[13]

This rule is not limited to young children. Thomas Moeller, a psychology professor at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia, examined students in grades 6 and higher. In every instance, he concluded, "academic achievement is more closely related to academic self-concept than to global self-concept."[14]

Other research found that although academic achievement in one grade level predicts academic self-esteem in the next grade, neither academic achievement nor academic self-esteem have any identifiable effect on global self-esteem.[15] Still other research finds that grades in a given discipline affect academic self-esteem in that particular discipline only. General academic self-concept finds its roots in a school's climate, teachers' ratings, and students' commitment to work.[16]

Adolescents' academic performance seems not even to be a factor affecting global self-esteem. Instead, they respond to social activities.[17] Beyond high school, high school performance, academic ability, and socioeconomic status affect educational attainment more than global self-esteem.[18]

Conclusion

After years of failed experimentation, it is time to stop touting the importance of self-esteem and start providing students with the elements real self-esteem is made of. As this Policy Brief shows, building self-esteem is not only a smokescreen vis-à-vis academic success, it can also lead to considerable harm. After all, as Weissbourd points out "to develop effective coping strategies, children, in fact, need to learn to manage a certain amount of disappointment and conflict."[19]

As schools turn against self-esteem theory, they must go back to the basics of teaching, reinstalling high standards and expectations, and holding children accountable for their actions. But these efforts ought not replace paying attention to children's needs and concerns as individuals. Many educators agree on three general strategies:

- Build the relationship between a teacher or parent and a child on respect for the child's inborn strengths,
- Help the child set goals and then link sustained effort with success, and
- Examine the values you are promoting, because self-esteem is grounded on what a person values.[20]

The final and probably most important remedy is reintroducing parents in the education of their children. Experts unanimously agree that parental involvement in a child's education remains one of the most important factors in determining a child's academic success. Furthermore, parents supersede teachers at building earned self-esteem in their children through the special caring and positive/negative reinforcement that can only come with individualized interaction at home.[21]

ENDNOTES

1. Mario A. Brossard and Richard Morin, "American Voters Focus on Worries Close to Home," Washington Post, September 15, 1996, pg. A1.

2. See, e.g., Chester E. Finn, "Narcissus Goes to School," Commentary, June 1990; Charles J. Sykes, Dumbing Down Our Kids, Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can't Read, Write, or Add, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995; Joseph Adelson, "Down with Self-Esteem," Commentary, February 1996.

3. Richard Weissbourd, The Vulnerable Child: What Really Hurts America's Children and What We Can Do About Them, New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995.

4. A. Soukhanov, Ed., Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary, Boston: The Riverside Publishing Company/Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984.

5. "Basic Behavioral Science Research for Mental Health: Vulnerability and Resilience," American Psychologist, January 1996, Vol. 51, No. 1.

6. Barbara Lerner, "Self-Esteem and Excellence: The Choice and the Paradox," American Educator, Winter 1985.

7. William Damon, Greater Expectations, Overcoming the Culture of Indulgence in America's Homes and Schools, New York: The Free Press, 1995.

8. Andrew Mecca et. al., eds. The Social Importance of Self-Esteem. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, pg. 15.

9. See, e.g., M. Jackson, Self-Esteem and Meaning, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984.

10. See, e.g., B.C. Hansford and J.A. Hattie, "The Relationship Between Self and Achievement/Performance Measures," Review of Educational Research, Vol. 52, 1982; Einar M. Skaalvik and Knut A. Hagvet, "Academic Achievement and Self-Concept," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 58, 1990; Herbert W. Marsh, "Causal Ordering of Academic Self-Concept and Academic Achievement," Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 82, 1990.

11. Harold Stevenson and James Stigler, The Learning Gap, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.

12. Hansford and Hattie.

13. Paul Weisberg, "Education and Enrichment Approaches," Handbook of Clinical Child Psychology, C.E. Walker and M.C. Roberts, Eds., New York: John Wiley, 1983.

14. Thomas Moeller, "Self-Esteem: How Important Is It to Improving Academic Performance?" Virginia Journal of Education, November 1993.

15. See, e.g., E.M. Skaalvik and K.A. Hagtvet, "Academic Achievement and Self-Concept: An Analysis of Causal Predominance in a Developmental Perspective," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 58, 1990.

16. See, e.g., D.R. Hoge, E.K. Smith, & S.L. Hanson, "School Experiences Predicting Changes in Self-Esteem of Sixth- and Seventh-Grade Students," Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 82, 1990.

17. See, e.g., Skaalvik.

18. See, e.g., J.G. Bachman and P.M. O'Malley, "Self-Concepts, Self-Esteem, and Educational Experiences: The Frog Pond Revisited," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 50, 1986.

19. Weissbourd.

20. Laura S. Stepp, "A Full Head of Esteem: Praising Kids and Putting Stars on Their Work Isn't Enough," Washington Post, February 21, 1995.

21. Weissbourd, Sykes and Damon.