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Losing Faith in the Self-Esteem Movement

Encouraging students to love themselves is not paying off in the classroom, educators and researchers say. The time is better spent, they say, on teaching the basics.

By RICHARD LEE COLVIN, Times Education Writer

At Loren Miller Elementary School in Los Angeles, a school struggling to raise test scores that are barely in double digits, children last year spent part of each day working on . . . their self-esteem.

In daily "I Love Me" lessons, they completed the phrase "I am . . . " with words such as beautiful, lovable, respectable, kind or gifted. Then they memorized the sentences to make them sink in.

No more. The daily "I Love Me" lessons will soon be replaced by rapid-fire drills and constant testing of kids' skills.

With the pressure to raise test scores building nationally, schools are rethinking their decades-long love affair with self-esteem.

Self-esteem, which burst into the national consciousness in the late 1980s with help from a California task force, has long endured attacks from cultural conservatives. What's new today is that the criticism is being heard from deans at such education bastions as Columbia University's Teacher's College and in prestigious venues such as the Harvard Mental Health Letter.

"The false belief in self-esteem as a force for social good can be not just potentially but actually harmful," wrote Carnegie Mellon University psychology professor Robyn M. Dawes in that publication in October.

Having high self-esteem certainly feels good, psychologists say. But, contrary to intuition, it doesn't necessarily pay off in greater academic achievement, less drug abuse, less crime or much of anything else. Or, if it does pay off, 10,000 or more research studies have yet to find proof.

With researchers growing increasingly negative about being positive, a switch from tenderness to tough love is in vogue now among social commentators, politicians and educators.

Fretting about students' feelings has become an unhealthy classroom obsession, researchers declare in academic journals and elsewhere. Better, they say, to spend more time on something children can justly be proud of–acing algebra or becoming a super speller.

"There's nothing that boosts self-concept more than being able to do something--it doesn't matter if it's reading or something on the monkey bars your brother can't do," said Robert J. Stevens, a professor of educational psychology at Penn State University.

That is the lesson teachers at Bessemer School in Pueblo, Colo., learned this year. Teachers there were stunned a year ago when only 12% of their fourth-graders were reading at grade level.

Out went the three hours they spent weekly on counseling and self-esteem classes. In came more attention to the basics. Up went test scores. Last fall, 64% of the students passed. And self-esteem soared.

"Because the scores are better, kids feel better about themselves," said fourth-grade teacher Rhonda Holcomb.

'Warm Fuzzies' and Grade Inflation

For decades schools have embraced the idea that it worked the other way around. Unless the classroom was cozy and thick with "warm fuzzies"--an educational watchword--students wouldn't even try. That led to a variety of policies aimed at protecting children's feelings.

It also led to grade inflation, an emphasis on group work rather than individual effort, the elimination of valedictorians and even the dearth of spelling bees, critics say.

"There may have been a time when we should have given more attention to children's self-esteem, but the pendulum has swung way too far in the opposite direction," said Janine Bempechat of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, author of "Against the Odds," a book about how to raise student achievement among "at-risk" youths.

Now, more psychologists, such as Roy F. Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, are declaring the self-esteem movement a fraud.

"It's time for people who have been claiming that improved self-esteem will improve performance to put up or shut up," said Baumeister, who has been studying self-esteem for two decades.

Last year, Baumeister, with co-author Brad Bushman

of Iowa State University, published the results of a new study that questions one of the most basic arguments of self-esteem advocates--that having good self-esteem makes a person kinder to others.

The study gave its test subjects the opportunity to blast faceless foes they felt had wronged them with a dose of high-decibel noise. The study concluded that there was no relationship whatsoever between individuals' views of themselves and their treatment of others.

All of this has forced the proponents of self-esteem into an uncomfortable and unfamiliar posture--defensiveness.

"There's a lot of programs out there that are crap and that are calling themselves 'self-esteem,' " said J.D. Hawkins, a school counselor in Normal, Ill., who is the incoming president of the National Assn. of Self-Esteem.

Bad programs focus on telling kids they should feel good although they "cannot read, write or spell or act in socially and morally responsible ways," according to an article on the association's Web site.

Hawkins argues that Baumeister and other critics confuse self-esteem with egotism, which is not the same thing. Rather, he said, healthy self-esteem "comes from being personally and socially responsible."

The attacks on self-esteem have taken a toll. Michael Furlong, a UC Santa Barbara professor who trains school psychologists, said self-esteem has been so devalued that "the only people who use [the term] are those who want to discredit the idea."

But that doesn't mean the concern of schools for students' emotional well-being is misplaced.

"Do you want kids to feel good and competent and capable and give them honest feedback?" he asked. "I wouldn't imagine that most people would say, 'No, I don't want those things.' "

Concern about how students feel is in no danger of disappearing from campuses because it serves too many purposes, said John P. Hewitt, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

In his book, *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, he wrote that it fits in with the culture's growing emphasis on feelings and on everyone's right to happiness. Everything from country and western songs to advice columns in farming magazines tout its value. And besides, singing songs in praise of oneself and playing games can be entertaining too.

At Loren Miller, the school has now adopted what its principal, Jean Davis Mitchell, describes as a "highly structured" intensive reading program. But school officials still fear that the academic push would go for naught if they do not deal with their students' feelings.

"Self-esteem is more important than test scores," said Mitchell, who became Loren Miller's principal this year. "If we're interested in raising lifelong learners, it's important that . . . we also address the emotional and social sides of children."

That's why the school's psychologist, parent center, after-school recreation program and anti-drug, anti-gang and anti-tobacco programs all focus on self-esteem. Similarly, bumper stickers distributed by Cleveland Elementary School in Santa Barbara proclaim that "all children are honored" at the school. Principal Michael Vail said he uses the school's monthly award ceremony to stress "over and over again . . . that they're all students of the month."

"When they don't excel, we say they have potential," Vail said. "You don't cast them out and say, 'You're not good or irresponsible or lazy.' You say, 'You didn't make it this time. Here is the mark we want you to hit and we're going to help you hit it.' "

In addition to awards ceremonies, schools provide golf lessons, outings to campgrounds, jogging regimens, cycling clubs and free backpacks--all to help students feel proud and special. School districts including San Francisco Unified have justified their creation of single-sex academies and proposals that students read books by nonwhite and female authors partly on the grounds that students' self-regard would be improved.

All this has its roots in social changes that began transforming American education in the years after World War II. High school enrollments were growing as more students stayed in school rather than heading directly to work after eighth grade. But the additional students were not necessarily college-bound. So, high schools took on the task of helping them learn practical "life" skills--such as how to balance a checkbook or prepare a balanced meal.

A central goal of the "life adjustment" movement, said UCLA psychology professor James Stigler, was to "make kids feel good about whoever they are." It was, observed the late historian Richard Hofstadter, a "a peculiar genuflection toward democracy."

A 'Vaccine' Against Academic Failure

During the 1970s and '80s, educators became increasingly aware that many of their students were dealing with stressful circumstances outside of school--poverty, racism, single-parent families and struggling as latchkey children.

So, educators tried to make schools as welcoming and supportive as possible to motivate students to try harder in school.

In a report published in 1989, the California "self-esteem" task force declared self-esteem to be a "vaccine" that would prevent all sorts of social ills, including academic failure. And, like other vaccines, it was the role of government to be sure that kids were inoculated.

It was a task that seemed sure to make a difference in

the classroom and it was seized on with gusto.

"A lot of kids, especially in this part of town, have low self-esteem and any program that's going to boost that is going to be beneficial," said Steven Hood, a fifth-grade teacher at Loren Miller, which serves an overwhelmingly poor Latino and African American population in South-Central Los Angeles.

"I tell them, 'You've got to tell yourself that you love yourself because you might not have anybody else to tell you that.' "

It is not only schools serving poor and minority children that stress the importance of self-esteem.

Christine Norvell, the principal at Pacific Elementary School in Manhattan Beach, said students whose feelings are hurt by a cruel remark from a teacher or fellow student will "turn off to learning for at least 30 minutes."

So the teachers at the school hand out "gold cards" or "Pacific Pal" certificates to students for their "attention to detail" or for "having excellent listening skills".

The goal, she said, "is not to continually shower the children with compliments," but to give them reinforcement "for making good choices."

Michele Borba, the Palm Springs-based creator of a program called Esteem Builders, this fall spoke to an audience of more than 4,000 teachers from 60 school districts at a Great America amusement park outside Chicago.

Her program, one of the most widely used in the nation, includes 1,200 activities and has children discuss why "I'm great" or draw self-portraits to increase their self-knowledge.

She said the activities help children feel secure, give them hope and the ability to get along with others. All of that, she said, should translate into greater academic achievement.

Last fall, the program's effectiveness was studied at three schools that had used the program for at least a year. The data do not show conclusively any improvement in academic achievement, Borba admits, but they do show significant increases in such things as students' willingness to undertake new tasks, establish goals and offer their ideas.

Among those touting the data is state Sen. John Vasconcellos (D-Santa Clara), who was the driving force behind the formation of the California task force. In a story that he has told many times, Vasconcellos recounts that although he was a good student and successful lawyer, he had such a poor opinion of himself it took decades of therapy to change it.

That is why he remains as much a believer in the importance of self-esteem as ever.

But Vasconcellos' story shows the difficulty of proving that there is a connection between self-esteem and performance. He may have been filled with self-doubt. But he was highly successful.

Self-esteem is "squishy" and difficult to measure, said Harry O'Neill, an education professor at USC. It means how you feel about "yourself in general."

Researchers have found that the self-esteem of even highly successful people varies not only daily but hourly. Moreover, the opinion one has of oneself is not necessarily realistic.

Students in Asia, for example, excelled on the recently completed *Third International Math and Science Study*. But students surveyed as part of that comparison showed that their opinion of their own skills was relatively low. American students, by contrast, think highly of their skills but perform poorly.

"We do a real disservice to our kids if we get them thinking they're doing OK if they're only doing OK in their own little world," O'Neill said.

Self-esteem, furthermore, depends on an individual's values. Students who don't see value in academic achievement may think highly of themselves even if their grades are terrible.

The use of praise in classrooms also is tricky and very often over-used, researchers said.

Sandra Graham, a UCLA education professor, said false praise can actually undermine students' confidence. Rather than making them feel good, they get the message that their teacher doesn't expect very much.

In many classrooms, Graham said, "it's just scripted that if the low achiever does anything, you praise them."

With the spread of those and other concerns about the value of programs pushing self-esteem, some experts now say it's time for a return to traditional notions of child-rearing.

Bempechat, the Harvard author, urges parents to "let children" suffer through tough assignments to teach them the value of good old-fashioned hard work.

Kids, she writes, need "the ability to delay gratification, to be persistent . . . and to maintain interest even as they dislike the work that they are doing."

More and more schools are developing programs aimed at "character" rather than self-esteem. The new programs often take a tougher line.

"We believe that guilt and shame are good things," said Michael Josephson, who heads the Los Angeles-based Josephson Institute of Ethics, which sponsors a widely used Character Counts program.

Although all people need a minimum level of self-esteem to get out of bed in the morning, Josephson said, too much leads to "self-esteemia--the toxic effect of worrying more about feeling good than doing good."

But advocates of self-esteem training remain undeterred. "Kids who have a good sense of themselves and are avidly curious will learn . . . and never stop learning," Vasconcellos said. "All the research in the world won't change my mind about it."