

Commentary

Teach math, not esteem

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So it turns out that American high school students do much worse in math than their peers in Hong Kong and South Korea. But the American kids think they're doing very well, thank you, while the Hong Kong and Korean students say they still have a long way to go.

What's up with that? The discrepancy has many causes, to be sure, but at least part of the blame lies with our schools. We tell our kids that they're wonderful, over and over again, until they actually believe it.

In other words, we lie.

According to a 40-nation study of high-school math skills released last week by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Hong Kong and Korea rank first and third in the world, respectively, while the United States is 28th. But in Hong Kong, 57 percent of kids agree with the statement, "I am just not good at mathematics"; in South Korea, the figure rises to 62 percent; and in the United States, only 36 percent agree. Nearly three-quarters of American kids said they got "good grades" in math, more than any other country. In Hong Kong, by contrast, just a quarter of the students said they received good marks.

In a very strange way, our system is working. For the last two decades, American schools have embraced a doctrine called "self-esteem." To succeed in life, the story goes, kids have to feel good about themselves. So schools invest untold millions in programs with names such as "I Like Me" or even "I Love Me," all designed to bolster self-esteem. They have also inflated students' grades, lest children feel inferior or unworthy.

But here's the great unreported fact of American education, which we should paste on every schoolhouse door: There is no solid evidence linking enhanced self-esteem to higher

academic achievement. None. More than 10,000 studies have tried to prove this relationship, but they have failed. You can feel great about yourself — and about your math abilities — but still stink at math.

Nor can we show that better self-esteem makes kids behave in more decent or responsible ways. Remember Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, the two kids who murdered 12 people at Columbine High School in 1999? The first reports said that Klebold and Harris suffered from low self-esteem, which caused them to lash out at others. But the truth was exactly the opposite. In his own diaries, Harris described himself as superior to almost everyone else. So do many gang members and other violent youth.

Aah, you might reply, that's not "real" self-esteem. It's narcissism, or aggression, or self-delusion. Instead of

quibbling over definitions, though, we should ask more basic questions. Why do schools pay such inordinate attention to the interior well-being of our kids? Why do we care — so very much — about what they feel? Shouldn't we be more concerned about what they know?

The doctrine of self-esteem reflects the broader postwar American embrace of psychology, which has become our predominant medium of public discussion and deliberation. Consider the landmark decision, currently celebrating its 50th anniversary. Segregating black children "generates a feeling of inferiority ... that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone," the Supreme Court declared in 1954. So segregation was wrong because it damaged black self-esteem.

Actually, there was little

real evidence then — or now — that black kids in segregated schools feel worse about themselves than black kids in integrated ones. Nor can we find any link between African American self-esteem and academic success. In several recent studies, in fact, black males show the highest self-esteem of any high school group — and the lowest levels of achievement.

Especially in schools of education, however, we continue to teach self-esteem as if it were gospel. And that's ironic, because most education school professors — including myself — are dyed-in-the-wool Democrats who champion reason and evidence over faith and dogma. We voted against President Bush because he ignores any facts that contradict his positions, especially regarding the war in Iraq. But when it comes to self-esteem, we do precisely the same thing.

We also ignore the experiences and belief systems of people outside of our own country, which is another charge we often level at President Bush.

Around the world, millions of children manage to achieve at high levels without demonstrating something that Americans call "self-esteem."

It's high time that American schools took notice. Instead of trying to make our kids feel good about themselves, we should devote our energies and resources to teaching them academic subjects — like math. As Hong Kong and Korea would be the first to tell you, self-esteem just doesn't belong in this equation.

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