The Truth About Self-Esteem (* )
The Truth About Self-Esteem

An Alternative Approach to Education

I. THE FACTS: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS (AND DOESN'T SAY)

A. The Destructive Impact of Failure

The destructive impact of failure on intrinsic motivation shows up with startling consistency. Its effect on short-term performance is well documented. But what about its impact on long-term aspirations? Many of us know the destructive force of failure. It is not so much the event of failure, or even its frequency, that disrupts performance as it is the way we react to it. The flip side of the fear that too much self-esteem will kill the desire to learn is the faith that the disappointment of one's efforts to learn. (Premature or unearned self-esteem would therefore short-circuit that natural process.)

Beyond its detrimental effect on performance, an experience with failure can produce two other overlapping results: a loss of confidence and a decreased willingness to take risks and try something new.

B. The Empirical Literature and Self-Esteem

The empirical literature as a whole, however, casts doubt on the claim that self-esteem enhances risk-taking. Research shows that the most effective teachers create environments where all students' contributions are valued. This creates a positive atmosphere where students feel safe expressing their ideas. Such environments encourage students to try new things and take calculated risks.

C. Classroom Interventions

If classroom interventions haven't proved successful in raising self-esteem over the long haul, and if self-esteem doesn't cause many children to perform better in school, what can we do? As educators, we need to consider the following: (1) What do the data say? (2) If we are going to dismiss the evidence, we also have to explain the reasons why. (3) What are the implications of what we do know?

1. What do the data say?

Some research has turned up an inverse relationship between self-esteem and success in education. However, the validity of their findings is questioned by some researchers. For example, one recent survey of teenagers discovered a moderate negative correlation between self-esteem and scholastic achievement. Other studies have shown a positive correlation between self-esteem and academic performance. Yet others have found no significant relationship.

2. If we are going to dismiss the evidence, we also have to explain the reasons why.

A reasonable question. But if we are going to dismiss the evidence, we also have to write off the evidence in support of self-esteem interventions. Some researchers are convinced that these data will support their claims. However, the efficacy of such interventions is virtually nil.

3. What are the implications of what we do know?

We as educators need to consider the reasons for the failure of self-esteem interventions. What do we mean by self-esteem? How do we measure it? What factors influence self-esteem? In this chapter, we will explore the theoretical basis for self-esteem interventions. We will examine the empirical evidence supporting these interventions. And we will consider the implications of what we do know for the future of our schools.

Reconstructing Individualism

In what follows, I try to show why most discussions of the theory of self-esteem are based on flawed assumptions. I review the available research, which contains unwelcome news for anyone who sees self-esteem as a key causal variable. I conclude that self-esteem is not the answer to our educational problems.