

## Narcissus Goes to School

*Chester E. Finn, Jr.*

SEVEN years ago, Americans were warned that a "rising tide of mediocrity" threatened to drown their schools, their children, and their nation. Although that tide has scarcely ebbed, today it is being swelled by another huge wave: a tsunami of artificial self-esteem.

Of course, almost everyone in the field of education has come to hold precisely the opposite premise—namely, that the great problem is a *lack* of self-esteem. Thus in California, the opening days of the new decade brought the final report of the state's "Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility." In three-plus years of labor, this 26-member bipartisan panel, established at the behest of veteran legislator John Vasconcellos, remained unintimidated by multiple *Doonesbury* cartoons lampooning it as "the first official study of New-Age thinking." At the conclusion of its labors, the task force grandiloquently declared that "The lack of self-esteem is central to most personal and social ills plaguing our state and nation as we approach the end of the 20th century."

In line with this declaration, the task force ascribed near-magical powers to self-esteem, characterizing it as "something that empowers us to live responsibly and that inoculates [*sic*] us against the lures of crime, violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, child abuse, chronic welfare dependency, and educational failure." In the education chapter of its report, the panel developed eleven recommendations, including required "course work in self-esteem" for all educators seeking credentials and the integration of self-esteem into the "total curricula" of every school and district. Meanwhile Vasconcellos, described by aides as "the Johnny Appleseed of self-esteem," has begun stumping the land promoting the task-force recommendations and urging that candidates' positions on self-esteem be used as a political litmus test for such posts as mayor and school superintendent.

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Self-esteem via curriculum reform has also recently become the focus of attention on the other side of the continent. In mid-February, the New York Board of Regents endorsed the recommendations of the State Education Commissioner, Thomas Sobol, concerning some controversial ideas for changing the course content of schools throughout the Empire State. Sobol was responding to the report of yet another task force—this one on minorities—that he himself had empaneled in 1987 for the purpose of reviewing the state's curriculum and instructional materials "to see if they adequately reflect the pluralistic nature of our society."

This 17-member task force, consisting primarily of minority-group members, retained additional "experts" to advise and assist it in the preparation of its report, entitled "A Curriculum of Inclusion." To no one's surprise, the panel spotted plenty of grave flaws in need of urgent rectification. "African Americans, Asian Americans, Puerto Ricans/Latinos, and Native Americans have all been the victims of an intellectual and educational oppression," due in no small part to curricula with "a terribly damaging effect on the psyche of young people." The good news, however, is that if the task force's wide-ranging recommendations are followed, minority youngsters "will have higher self-esteem and self-respect, while children from European cultures will have a less arrogant perspective. . . ."

In seeking the Regents' consent to proceed in this direction—a consent that was unanimously granted—Sobol used cooler language to embrace the central psychodynamic premise of the task force. "We know," the commissioner asserted, "that if children are to achieve they must trust their teachers and feel good about themselves." This condition, he assured his board, would be created through "curricula and teaching which represent children's backgrounds, which help them discover more about themselves and people like them. . . ."

Self-esteem in California, feeling good about oneself in New York. And more of the same across the land. The director of elementary schools in Fulton County, Georgia, avers that "high self-esteem is a prerequisite for high academic achievement and success in life." Governor William

Schaefer appoints a 23-member self-esteem task force for his state of Maryland. "Self-esteem citizens' groups" are said to be active in Missouri, New Mexico, and Florida. Michigan has a "Teenage Council on Self-Esteem." The National Education Association tells its two million members that schools "must structure esteem-building into the curriculum. They must modify the school culture to eliminate any negative effect it may be having on students."

Since every education fad quickly spawns its own interest groups, there now exist both a National Council for Self-Esteem and a Foundation for Self-Esteem. It is rare to pick up a copy of an education journal without finding several articles on the subject, and rarer still to attend any of the innumerable conferences the profession holds each year without stumbling into rooms full of people solemnly discussing how best to foster self-esteem in children. The next generation of educators is getting similar messages in college. "Elementary-school teachers are being taught," reports Rita Kramer after an extended examination of teacher-education programs around the nation, "to concern themselves with children's feelings of self-worth and not with the worth of hard work or of realistically measured achievement."

SOME of this, as the cartoonist Garry Trudeau suggested in his *Doonesbury* spoofs, reveals the infiltration of formal education by New-Age thinking, with its notion of transcending one's limitations (and, if necessary, objective reality itself) by soaking in an appropriate blend of sun, love, selfhood, and otherness. To this influence we can probably trace the origins of such efforts as Los Angeles's "Square-Foot Gardening" project, described by the school system as "designed to increase 750 students' self-esteem and awareness of ecological and environmental concerns by allowing them to put together and manage a garden on the campus of Van Nuys Elementary School." The same sort of sensibility was at work in a recent Sacramento "self-esteem seminar" where, as reported in the *New York Times*, "thirty teachers were led through a series of motivational exercises that began with the students massaging their classmates' shoulders, to relax the group and create a bond."

Beneath the goofiness, however, are two important assumptions about formal education itself. The first is that self-esteem is a desirable personal acquisition which can and should be purposefully cultivated by the schools, much like physical health, reasoning skills, scientific prowess, and good character.

The second is that self-esteem is also a means to other ends, functioning in relation to the mind somewhat as an essential amino acid operates within the biochemistry of the body. Just as we suppose that children will be less likely to succeed

academically if they lack enough sleep, or a full belly, or a sufficiency of pencils, so we are asked to believe that youngsters who do not feel good about themselves will similarly fare poorly in school.

Contemporary American educators instinctively adhere to both assumptions. Unfortunately, however, there is no solid basis for believing that either is correct. Self-esteem, it emerges from a vast body of research, is a much more slippery and elusive phenomenon than its zealous promoters may realize. It is subject to conflicting definitions, some involving fundamental distinctions—notably between the very different concepts of "self-worth" and "personal efficacy." Levels of self-esteem are far from easy to measure, and even after we obtain data, they turn out to correlate only slightly with other desirable qualities that task forces and teacher-training classes hope to foster. Many of the statistical relationships are actually negative.

Summarizing the research literature for the California self-esteem task force, in the introduction to a scholarly volume (*The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*) published in tandem with the panel report, the distinguished Berkeley sociologist Neil J. Smelser had this glum comment:

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. In some cases, consistent relationships are found. . . . Sometimes, however, the associations run in unexpected directions. . . . The news most consistently reported, however, is that the associations between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant, or absent. . . . If the association between self-esteem and behavior is so often reported to be weak, even less can be said for the causal relationship between the two. . . . [T]o put the matter more simply, the scientific efforts to establish those connections that we are able to acknowledge and generate from an intuitive point of view do not reproduce those relations.

This is a damning thing to say in a volume meant to provide scientific backing for the conclusions of a task force urging hugely increased attention to self-esteem. Several dissenting panel members noted this paradox. But responsible social science seldom has much influence over minds dominated by other agendas.

To be sure, education was one of the areas in which Smelser and his colleagues did report a positive association between self-esteem and its expected consequences. Yet these correlations were quite low, accounting for less than 5 percent of variation in student achievement, and the causal link was obscure. It is as likely that heightened self-esteem flows from academic achievement as that improved achievement is caused by self-esteem; indeed, many other studies have come to this very conclusion. It is also quite possible—again,

as many studies suggest—that the two attributes vary together, neither pulling the other but, rather, both affected in similar fashion by independent influences such as innate ability, social class, and prior accomplishment.

**H**ISTORY is often a more reliable guide than social science, and in looking back at the American past one can hardly miss the influence on our national character of attitudes that resemble self-esteem even if nobody then knew the phrase. Leaving behind them the deterministic religions and caste-paralyzed societies of the Old World, those who came to these shores and then pushed on—first into the West, eventually into space—sensed that social, economic, and physical mobility depended largely on one's own talent, energy, and application, and that practically anything was possible if one believed in oneself and worked hard enough.

The realization that good things came to—and were accomplished by—individuals with faith in their own abilities fostered an array of organized efforts to imbue people with confidence. These ranged from individual psychotherapy to religious revivalism, and involved figures as varied as William James and Mary Baker Eddy, Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale, Erik Erikson and Kurt Hahn. Donald Meyer has called them “positive thinkers,” practitioners of “mind cure,” an activity by means of which Americans were encouraged to look within themselves for antidotes to whatever discontents they might have.

What such efforts have demonstrated is that in small doses “mind cure” can be effective. With proper encouragement, a reasonable mix of incentives, rewards, and punishments, and a sprinkling of will-power, most people can do more and better than they initially supposed. The “little engine that could” is a classic of children's bedtime reading not just because it has a happy ending but also because it attests to “the power of positive thinking.” Eugene Lang's “I Have a Dream” program, and its many imitators around the country, do excellent work with disadvantaged youngsters not so much by assisting them to dream as by encouraging them to strive and to attain heights they had not thought within their reach.

On the far side of those mental peaks, however, lies a treacherous canyon. It begins where what one thinks about oneself starts to diverge from reality, where dreams get confused with fact, where optimism about the future turns into delusions about the past. It is the disorder we know as narcissism, defined in the psychopathology textbooks as “persistent and unrealistic overvaluation of one's own importance and achievements.”

By now the “culture of narcissism”—to borrow Christopher Lasch's famous phrase—has come to supply much of what passes for guiding precepts in the field of education. “The main thing,” Rita Kramer reports a student-teacher as saying, “is for

them to feel good about themselves as readers”—this, by way of explaining a decision not to introduce her second graders to any words they did not already know. It is not surprising that this woman's classmates and professor beamed at her explanation. “Teachers generally seem to accept the modern dogma,” the psychologist Barbara Lerner has written, “that self-esteem is the critical variable for intellectual development—the master key to learning.”

The doors that key is now unlocking reveal little real learning—though one already finds tons of self-esteem. The most notorious example of this discrepancy is the 1988 international-achievement test on which American thirteen-year-olds got the lowest score in mathematics proficiency but, when asked whether they judged themselves to be good at math, awarded themselves the highest rating in the world.

Harold W. Stevenson's pioneering comparative research has found essentially the same amazing gap between actual accomplishment and self-evaluation:

When asked to rate such characteristics as ability in mathematics, brightness, and scholastic performance, American children gave themselves the highest ratings, while Japanese students gave themselves the lowest. . . . When asked how well they would do in mathematics in high school, 58 percent of American fifth graders said they expected to be above average or among the best students. These percentages were much higher than those of their Chinese and Japanese peers, among whom only 26 and 29 percent, respectively, were this optimistic.

“Doing bad and feeling good,” the columnist Charles Krauthammer recently called it in a trenchant essay.

**T**HE schools are in significant measure responsible for this bizarre discrepancy. Cheery report cards convey favorable grades and reassuring comments. Parent conferences are almost always upbeat. Promotion to the next grade is guaranteed, as is a diploma, so long as one clocks enough time in school, with assured admission to the state college down the road.

Conversely, according to the prevailing wisdom, there should be no competition in the classroom, no tracking of youngsters by ability or attainment, no obliging anyone to attend summer school, and, above all, no uniform standard to which the hated “standardized tests” might be aligned. “It doesn't matter what you do, but who you are,” is the message one recent graduate told a newspaper reporter that he had received from his high-school “self-esteem” course.

“When the self-esteem movement takes over a school,” wrote John Leo in a perceptive column in *U.S. News & World Report*, “teachers are under pressure to accept every child as is. To keep children feeling good about themselves, you must

avoid all criticism and almost any challenge that could conceivably end in failure."

No wonder American youngsters think they are doing well. But it is not just the students who inhabit a world of illusory accomplishment. So do their parents. Stevenson and his associates found that nine out of ten American mothers were satisfied with their children's current academic performance—a far higher proportion than mothers in Asia, who had far better reason to be satisfied.

American educators are not trying to dupe students or their parents. On the contrary: the professional culture that encourages them to make children feel good about their performance has also persuaded *them* that the schools are in sound shape. Recent surveys make plain that the overwhelming majority of today's educators—a mind-boggling 92 percent in the case of teachers—think their present schools are doing a good or excellent job.

Self-esteem levels, then, are already so high that it is hard to understand why anyone would think they need to be further inflated. According to the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, 80 percent of the high-school graduating class of 1988 "take a positive attitude" toward themselves, 83 percent judge themselves to be "person[s] of worth," 79 percent claim to be generally satisfied with themselves, and 74 percent *disagree* with the statement, "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" (only 15 percent agree with it).

This senior class of 1988 was made up of the same young people among whom, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only one in twenty could read at a level of sophistication needed for college-level work, only 26 percent could write an adequate persuasive letter, and a third did not know that the Mississippi River flows into the Gulf of Mexico.

With such dismal achievement on the one hand, and millions of contented, self-satisfied, even smug, youngsters on the other, what could possibly lead serious grown-ups to the conclusion that the root of the nation's education problem lies in a deficit of self-esteem?

WHERE black children in particular are concerned, the suspicion that lagging achievement is linked to low self-esteem can be traced back to several studies in the early 1950's, notably the famous "doll" experiment conducted by the psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark in which black children favored light-skinned dolls, leading to the conclusion that they had a low opinion of blacks and therefore, presumably, of themselves. This was believed to contribute to weak academic performance.

In the ensuing thirty-five years, however, much has changed in American society and a great deal

more research has been done on these matters. The newer studies have recently been summarized by Stanley Rothman and associates at Smith College's Center for the Study of Social and Political Change. They find that, while the self-esteem levels of blacks are now at least as high as those of whites, the average academic attainment among black students (though it has improved) remains below that of whites. The evidence, they conclude, "appears to show quite conclusively that the low-self-esteem hypothesis is neither a necessary nor sufficient explanation of black achievement levels."

The Michigan twelfth-grade survey data cited earlier have also been broken down by race, and here too little difference shows up between blacks and whites on questions that probe for self-esteem. In fact, black students reported slightly *higher* levels of agreement with statements about taking a positive attitude toward oneself, judging oneself to be a person "of worth," and being generally satisfied with oneself.

The only questions on which black and white seniors manifested modest differences in the other direction were concerned with what psychologists term "personal efficacy" or sense of control—i.e., the belief that one can actually accomplish what one sets out to do. Given, for example, the statement, "Every time I try to get ahead, something or somebody stops me," 36 percent of blacks agreed as against 25 percent of whites. Black students were also slightly more likely to think that "people who accept their condition in life are happier than those who try to change things," and that "planning only makes a person unhappy since plans hardly ever work out anyway." (It must be noted, however, that many more black students *rejected* these three propositions than identified with them.)

The distinction between "personal efficacy" and self-worth—i.e., believing oneself to be a good and valuable person—turns out to be important in research on self-esteem. For whites, the two usually vary together: an individual with an elevated sense of self-worth is likely also to display a robust sense of personal efficacy. And in the white population both qualities are in reasonably good shape. Among blacks, however, while feelings of self-worth are at least as sturdy as among whites, the sense of personal efficacy is somewhat weaker, and not only among high-school seniors. But this creates a huge dilemma for those who hope to boost minority self-esteem: personal efficacy has its roots in actual accomplishment, in prior experience, in the realities of where one is and what one has done. Its "significant predictors," say the psychologists Michael Hughes and David H. Demo in a 1989 study, are "education, personal income, quality of family and friendship relations, gender, and age." Roger Wilkins, now teaching history at George Mason University, notes that "for those born into or living in situations where

there is no stability, or where the only successful people are criminals, self-esteem isn't going to do it for them."

Clearly, then, a school system wanting to heighten the sense of personal efficacy among minority children will have to teach them well enough to raise their actual achievement.<sup>1</sup> Jaime Escalante (of *Stand and Deliver* fame) has figured this out, and succeeds brilliantly in teaching calculus to poor Hispanic youngsters in the barrio of East Los Angeles. So has the California high-school principal who cautioned a New York *Times* reporter that educators should not "just say 'they don't like themselves,' and that's it. Teach them how to read and write properly, and they'll feel better about themselves." Kenneth Clark also understood the central principle two decades ago. As recounted by Christopher Lasch:

[I]t remained for [black] moderates like Kenneth Clark to make the genuinely radical point that "black children or any other group of children can't develop pride by just saying they have it, by singing a song about it, or by saying I'm black and beautiful or I'm white and superior." Racial pride, Clark insisted, comes from "demonstrable achievement."

**I**F DIVORCING the feedback a youngster gets in school from the actuality of his achievement is the first wrong move by contemporary esteem-enhancers, the second is taking a psychological construct which is mainly applicable to individuals and transforming it into a group property.

This is what the New York curriculum debate has been about. Recall the reasoning followed by creators of the "curriculum of inclusion": students need to be assured through their lessons that the ethnic group to which they belong has much to be proud of, because only if they think well of their group will they think well of themselves, and only if they think well of themselves will they succeed in their studies. It follows that the curriculum must be altered to end "exclusionary" tendencies which feed the "Eurocentric" arrogance of "majority" children while giving minority youngsters so little to learn about the contributions of their group that they feel depressed and inadequate.

In weighing the plausibility of this analysis, one must temporarily set aside the strange assumption that self-esteem is finite, something rationed by society through a "zero-sum" strategy that subtracts from one group whatever added esteem is conferred on another. One must forget, too, that the aspect of self-esteem which (some) minority students need more of is the type associated with bona-fide achievement, not the kind related to group pride. Consider only the paradoxical case of Asian-American youngsters. If curriculum-induced, group-linked esteem were truly a necessary precondition for educational achievement, these

boys and girls would be the weakest students in America. After all, their "group"—actually representing dozens of different "cultures"—is the most thoroughly ignored in textbooks, state and local curriculum guides, and special observances and other attention-directing strategies on the part of schools. Yet by every relevant measure, Asian immigrants and their children have the highest average attainment levels of any minority; indeed, they register higher on some gauges than the "arrogant" majority.

That Commissioner Sobol's advisory panel did not even pause over this sizable lacuna in its reasoning surely indicates that the goals it seeks via curricular manipulation are far larger than minority self-esteem and school achievement. For what is really going on here is a guerrilla attack on the principle that Americans share any sort of "common culture," a continuing frontal assault against Western civilization in particular, the fanning of separatist flames within the population, and a lightly veiled quest for influence and fame by those who manage to present themselves as leaders or "experts" on behalf of the groups thus delineated. The zero-sum argument simply raises the temperature further by hinting to each group that what it needs more of must be taken from others who have too much.

We have already encountered such a hidden agenda at least once before. As Abigail Thernstrom\* and others have shown, bilingual education was originally presented as a pedagogical strategy for helping immigrant youngsters to become fluent enough in English to enter successfully into the mainstream of American schools. In fairly short order, however, that goal was transformed into a campaign for heightened group consciousness, the purposeful maintenance of children's original languages and cultures, a much more leisurely approach to English fluency, and legitimation within educational policy and curricula of what Professor Diane Ravitch of Teachers College, Columbia, terms "particularistic multiculturalism." Proponents of this doctrine, says Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, are "not primarily interested in contributions that various groups have made to our history. They want to make sure minority students get told nice stories about themselves."

**N**OR should one assume that large racial and ethnic minorities are the only kinds that will qualify for such special treatment. The curriculum in Hawaiian schools places heavy emphasis on "native Hawaiian culture"; and representatives of native Hawaiian groups are pressing for similar handling in mainland classrooms. In addition, a recent article in the *Harvard*

\* See her article, "Bilingual Miseducation," in the February issue of COMMENTARY.

*Educational Review* urged the further revision of school curricula to “include the historical contributions of gay men and lesbians,” and other efforts by public schools to build the self-esteem of young homosexuals. One can imagine future initiatives of this kind on behalf of many other demographic subsets.

In the colleges, such curricular additions are sometimes referred to as “victim studies,” and at a growing number of post-secondary institutions one can take courses, or even a major, in women’s studies, black studies, Chicano studies, and so forth. That this type of thinking about education has trickled down into the schools is hardly surprising. One way or another, every significant development in higher education eventually echoes in the elementary-secondary system. But there is an immense distinction among levels of education: individuals can decide for themselves which college (if any) to attend and, most of the time, what to study there. Schooling, by contrast, is compulsory up to a legally prescribed age, and unless one is able to afford private tuition one is obliged to study whatever curriculum the public-education system teaches. (In some states, private schools must also cover essentially the same content, if only so that their students can pass state tests.)

Accordingly, what the public schools define as their curriculum is what nearly all children will learn. It is the foundation of the knowledge, values, and ideas on which colleges and graduate schools later build. And it is the only formal education that some people ever receive, an education meant to equip them as citizens, parents, and members of a free society, as well as earners-of-a-living.

That, of course, is why the school curriculum has always been an object of political scrutiny, and why the social philosophy underlying the recent task-force critique in New York is at least as important as its psychological assumptions. The contention that building self-esteem is an urgent curricular and pedagogical priority becomes the ground both for including more about particular groups in the corpus of what is taught and for ensuring that the additional material is rendered in pleasant and encouraging ways, at least for members of those groups. It thereby unites psychology and philosophy in dubious alliance. And it invites serious deformations of historical reality.

Distortion enters when we exaggerate the contributions of any one group, either in absolute terms (ascribing to members of a group significant achievements that may not really have been theirs or may not have been very significant) or in relative terms (as when we downplay the

accomplishments of others lest we cede too much credit to an “arrogant” or “overrepresented” group). The practical effect is to impose achievement quotas on history itself, quotas that change with the contemporary political results one seeks.

**F**ORTUNATELY, the truth retains some rugged allies in the education profession. Shanker, for example, insists that “We must strongly oppose any rewriting of history that tries to divide our past up like a pie among competing groups and any curriculum that is dependent on political pressure.” Yet this is precisely what, under cover of increasing self-esteem, the new particularistic multiculturalists are trying to do, as the “curriculum of inclusion” report in New York all but explicitly admitted:

African American, Asian American, Latin, Native American culture or any other culture has no inherent weakness. Our educational system, however, teaches children of these cultures that they are marginal, have contributed little of substance to the land of their birth, and are fortunate that European Americans are so noble as to grant them limited access to the conditions of the dominant culture. From this distortion of reality grows racism, arrogance, and self-doubt. . . . A truly multicultural curriculum represents a body of knowledge about the African, Asian, Latin American/Caribbean, Native American, and European experience and presents an alternative approach to the education system. To the extent that this alternative curriculum with its equitable treatment of all cultures eliminates omissions . . . and challenges ethnocentric traditions of all kinds—it improves educational endeavors. . . . [Hence] the Commissioner [should] direct appropriate staff to undertake without delay a revision of all curricula and curricular materials so as to ensure that they are compatible with goals of equity and excellence for all cultures within our society. . . .

Thus is the fabric of a truly pluralistic society frayed, as children learn to eye one another with envy and suspicion, encouraged by teachers and textbooks to separate themselves into self-absorbed mutually hostile demographic factions. For a preview of the future envisioned for the United States of America by designers of New York’s grandly misnamed “curriculum of inclusion” and their counterparts elsewhere in the land, one can look at intergroup relations in Lebanon, Kashmir, the Transcaucasus, even Canada. Youngsters in such places may brim with the self-esteem that is associated with pride-in-group. We should, however, pause a very long time before wishing their sorry and often violent fate upon our own sons and daughters.