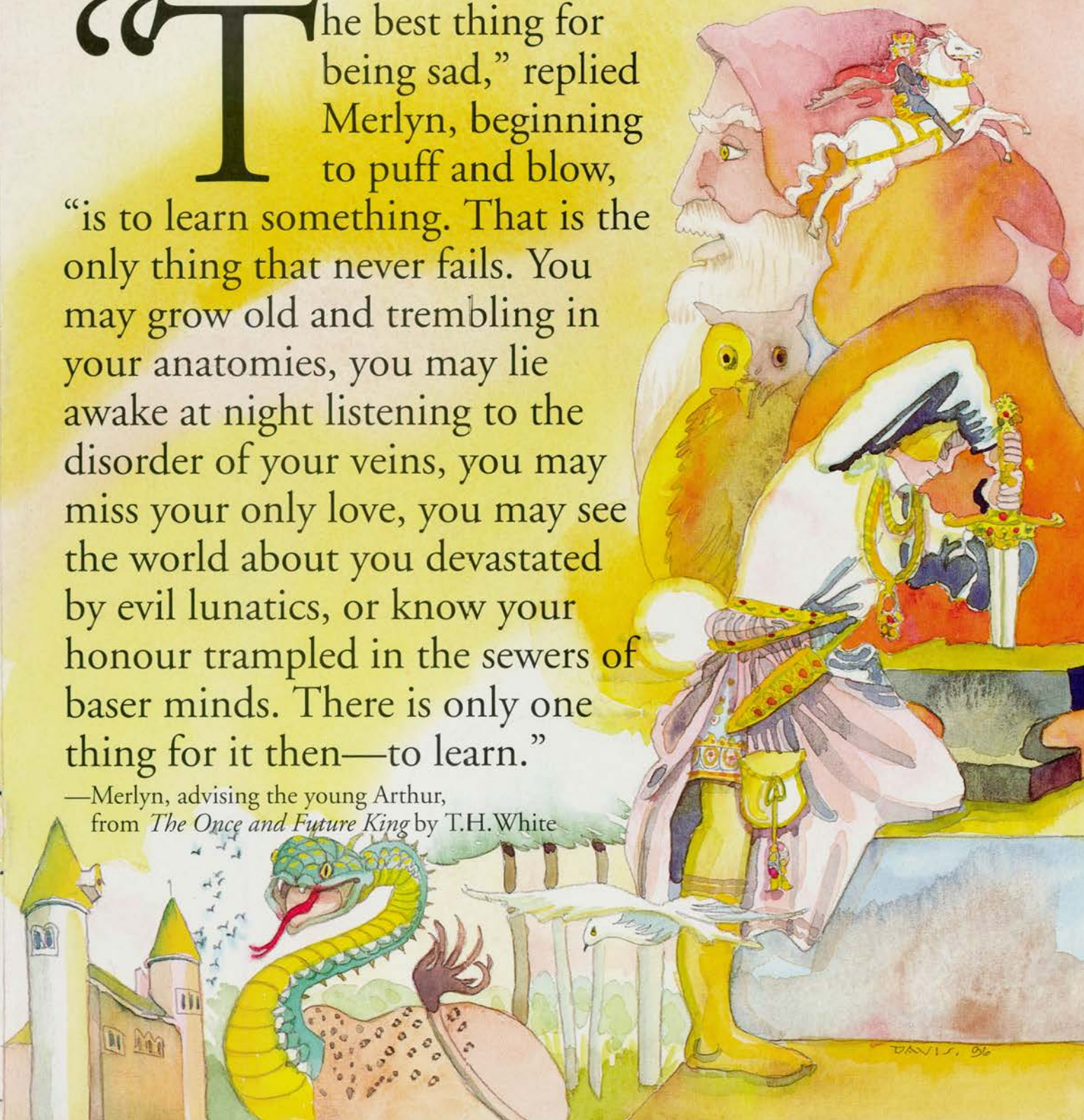


AMERICAN Educator

“The best thing for being sad,” replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, “is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn.”

—Merlyn, advising the young Arthur,
from *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White



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Mary Power Boyd
associate editor

Marcia Reecer
associate editor

Sandra Brown
editorial assistant

Andrew Bornstein
design consultant

Cover illustrated by Susan Davis

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Washington, DC 20001
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Advertising Sales Representative
Peter Li, Inc.

Debbie Paxton
330 Progress Road
Dayton, OH 45449
800-523-4625
513-847-5900; Fax # 513-847-5910

Karen Dorné
Peter Li, Inc.
310 Madison Ave., Suite 1809
New York, NY 10017
212-818-0700; Fax # 212-818-0708

West
JoAnn McDevitt, Melanie Jenkins
Peter Li, Inc.
222 Front Street, Suite 401
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415-439-5600; Fax # 415-439-5619

Southwest and Midwest
Terry Nelson
Peter Li, Inc.
8420 W. Bryn Mawr Ave., Suite 413
Chicago, IL 60631
312-380-5080; Fax # 312-380-5087

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MERLYN'S MAGIC... AND OURS



BY BARBARA LERNER

"The best thing for being sad," replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds.

"There is only one thing for it then—to learn."

T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*, 1939.

The man who spoke those words was King Arthur's tutor—Arthur of Camelot—and like all master teachers in every time and place, he was a magician

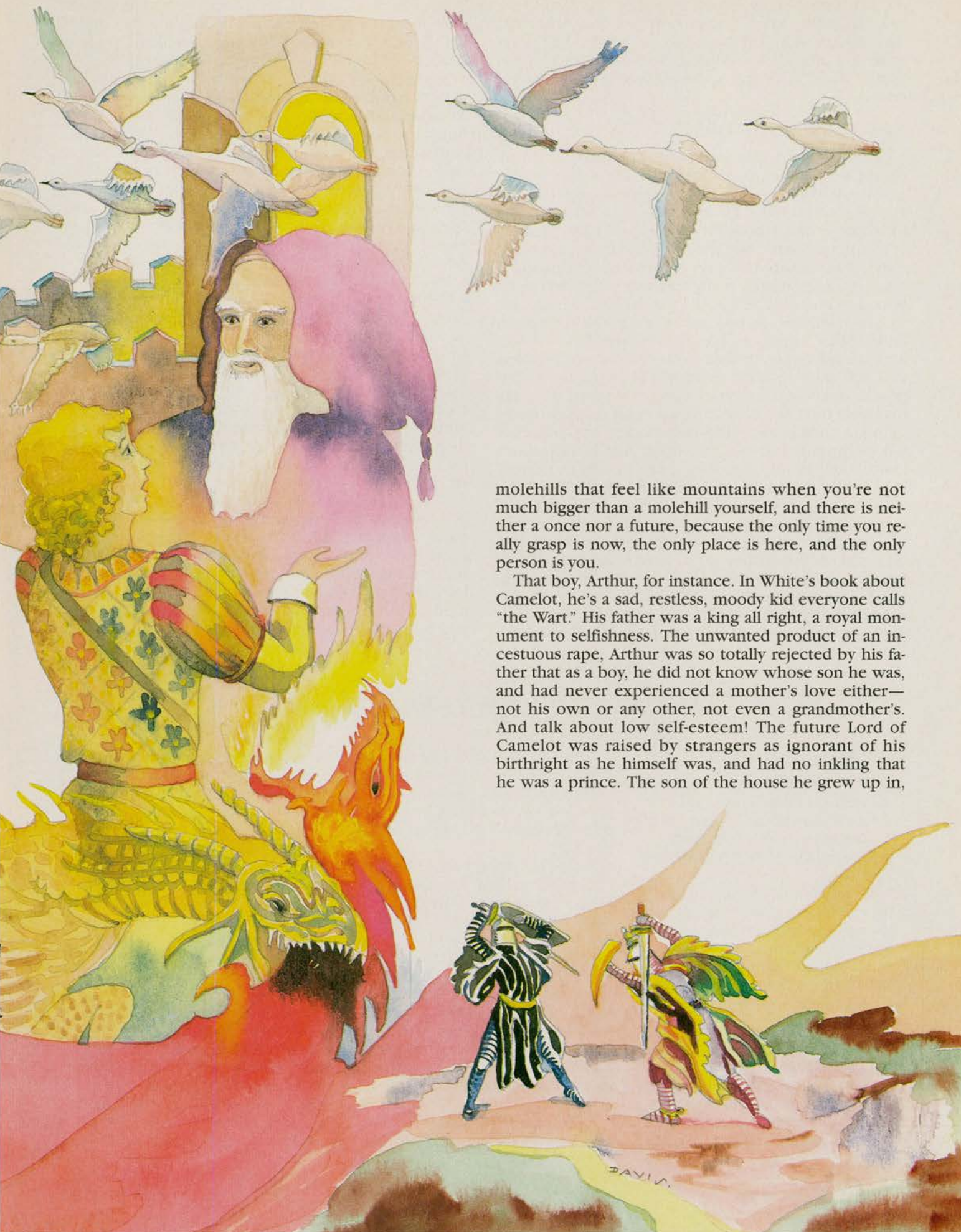
too. Magicians transform things, and Merlyn's great trick was transforming sadness into fascination and joy. And like so many teachers today, he had his work cut out for him. Then as now, there was a lot of sadness to transform. Many of Merlyn's students were troubled kids from broken homes, kids who had experienced rejection, neglect, and worse. Kids who were menaced by the promiscuity and violence all around them.

And of course, in addition to all those big reasons for being sad, all of Merlyn's kids also had all the small reasons the young always have. All the wrong-shoes

Barbara Lerner, a psychologist and attorney, is president of Lerner Associates, a research and consulting firm in Princeton, New Jersey. Copyright © 1996 by Barbara Lerner.

ILLUSTRATED BY SUSAN DAVIS





molehills that feel like mountains when you're not much bigger than a molehill yourself, and there is neither a once nor a future, because the only time you really grasp is now, the only place is here, and the only person is you.

That boy, Arthur, for instance. In White's book about Camelot, he's a sad, restless, moody kid everyone calls "the Wart." His father was a king all right, a royal monument to selfishness. The unwanted product of an incestuous rape, Arthur was so totally rejected by his father that as a boy, he did not know whose son he was, and had never experienced a mother's love either—not his own or any other, not even a grandmother's. And talk about low self-esteem! The future Lord of Camelot was raised by strangers as ignorant of his birthright as he himself was, and had no inkling that he was a prince. The son of the house he grew up in,

the constant companion of his youth, was in training to be a knight when Merlyn came on the scene, and Arthur was sadly preparing to be his groom. What other job, after all, could fate have in store for an abandoned child with no responsible relatives and no money?

New Magic Versus Old

Confronted by this sad boy today, many teachers would set to work to try to apply the magic of this post-modern age of ours—psychology—using the therapeutic approach that has been common in classrooms for three decades now. General support for rigorous academic standards like the ones endorsed in the last issue of this magazine notwithstanding, with a child like Arthur, especially, many teachers would feel duty-bound to make the lessons of the day take a back seat to his problems, letting curriculum and discipline slide. They would concentrate instead on raising Arthur's self-esteem because they care about troubled kids and want to make them feel better, and because post-modern psychologists have convinced teachers that until they do, these kids won't be ready to learn. To get Arthur ready, these post-modern psychologists tell us, teachers should encourage him to talk about himself and about his troubles, urging him to express himself and to share his feelings as freely as possible.

Of course, they should teach science and math and history and literature too—they are teachers, after all—but the focus should stay on Arthur himself, and on whatever material seems to have some sort of obvious, immediate relevance to his own life, real or fantasized. The main goal, the priority aim, whatever the ostensible topic, should be to help him develop a more positive sense of self and to that end, teachers

should lavish praise on everything he says and does, and emphasize lessons that are flattering to him and to his ancestors, teaching him to take undiluted pride in himself and his heritage, however he defines it.

Merlyn didn't do that. He could have, easily; he understood the boy and cared about him, and he knew all along that Arthur was a prince, but he didn't tell him that, not until Arthur was grown. And by then, Arthur didn't need to hear it from Merlyn. He had already proved that he was as fit to lead as he was to follow, first to himself and then to everyone around him. He was, as it turned out, the one person in the kingdom that became Camelot who could pull the magic sword loose from the stone. And everyone sang his praises when he did.

But Merlyn didn't prepare Arthur to perform that feat by building his self-esteem. He didn't focus on Arthur's self at all, and he didn't let the boy stay focused on it for long. Instead, he followed the advice he gave in the opening words of this article. He said: "The best thing for being sad is to learn," and that's what he made Arthur do, insisting, from the start, that Arthur focus in hard on learning, so hard that he totally lost himself in it. And in doing that, Merlyn taught the boy to transcend the self and all its sorrows, leaving his own lonely heart, lousy prospects, and wounded ego far behind.

That was Merlyn's magic, the old magic of teaching and learning. Not the in-passing, by-the-way, among-other-things, peripheral-vision kind of learning that became the norm in so many post-modern classrooms, but the sort of focused, concentrated, full-attention learning that absorbs you so completely that it lifts you right up out of yourself and your own situation, taking you to another place entirely, plunking you down in

AH, SWEET MYSTERY OF IRRELEVANCE

BY EDMUND JANKO

I DON'T KNOW when relevance in education was invented, but it sure wasn't around when I was in elementary school 50 or so years ago. And I say, "Thank goodness!"

When I walked to school in Maspeth, N.Y., every morning on the other side of the railroad tracks, I saw strings of grimy box-cars leaking dirty straw and a line of soot-blackened factories with a lot of punched-out windows.

Edmund Janko was a high-school English teacher in New York City for many years. He writes frequently on education issues. This essay first appeared in the Oct. 9, 1991, issue of Education Week and is reprinted with permission.

It was a time when a lot of people on my block, including my parents, talked a lot about hoping to get a few hours of work here and there or maybe catching on with the W.P.A.

So the last thing I wanted when I got to school was a lesson on the crisis of world capitalism or the constitutionality of the National Recovery Act—even if I could have possibly imagined these were the kinds of things that school was supposed to be about.

P.S. 74 back then was a two-story wooden building next to a bakery whose chimneys steeped our classrooms in the comforting, nurturing smell of baking bread.

I remember dreaming over my reader in the afternoon free-read-

ing period, yielding to the lazy, comforting warmth of those lovely kitchen smells. It was just the right atmosphere for irrelevance.

While the dispossessed farmers were making their painful way across the pages of *The Grapes of Wrath*, my mind was on the road to Mandalay, particularly on the "Burma Girl," and I wondered whether she could have looked as good as Henrietta Majeski, who sat across the row two seats away.

And who was this man that she was thinking of? Someone like me, I supposed—a devil-may-care soldier of fortune. And I had no trouble putting my formidable military skills at the service of the British Empire, particularly when it meant serving as a junior ensign with

whole new worlds beyond your own. To worlds you never would have dreamed of if it weren't for books and teachers. The kind of total-immersion, in-depth learning that holds you in thrall until the bell rings, then returns you to yourself—an enlarged self, enriched and empowered by new perspectives and a whole new range of possibilities. At least, that's how I see Merlyn's lessons, but that's not how Arthur experienced them.

To Arthur, as T.H. White shows us in *The Once and Future King*, Merlyn's lessons were pure adventures. The boy had been splashing aimlessly about in the shallows of life, bored and restless and unhappy, when Merlyn picked him up and dropped him right into the moat, making him dive deep down into the murky waters where he learned to swim with the flighty fish, half-blind and often foolish, forgetting his own fears by understanding theirs, and learning to soothe them. And when he was back on dry land again, Merlyn taught Arthur to burrow deep into the earth, dropping him first among the ants, a brainwashed bunch, slaving away in a totalitarian world suffused with propaganda about the glories of their grim world and the all-powerful boss ant they all bowed down to. And when Arthur had experienced what it was like to be trapped in that world and wanted out, Merlyn sent him back down into the earth again, but this time, he paired him up with the badgers, industrious, self-directed craftsmen and master builders in a world they were forever remaking. And when the boy had lived in their world and absorbed some of its lessons, Merlyn sent him soaring high above the earth, flying free in the wind, in the exhilarating company of the wild geese, streaking across the sky on democracy's long journey.

At least, that's how Arthur experienced Merlyn's

lessons. But of course, it was really science and math and history and literature that he was filling Arthur's moody head with, and it distanced Arthur from the sorrows of his youth, giving him some much-needed relief from sadness and a taste of joy. It taught him to lose himself in learning, and that stood him in good stead all through his life because, as Merlyn knew from the start, sorrow is never a stranger for long, not even to kings, not even in Camelot. And Merlyn's lessons were more than a psychic balm to Arthur's soul. They had great practical utility too because, as Merlyn also knew, all our worlds are always in danger of crumbling down around us, always in need of remaking, rebuilding and creating anew.

Merlyn's approach was dominant in American classrooms for a long time, and it served our students—and their teachers—well. School standards and test scores were higher then, and pathology rates were lower. There was less crime and delinquency, less violence, addiction and illegitimacy; more hard, focused work, and more joy in it.

Teachers were not insensitive to their student's feelings and attitudes—far from it—but, like Merlyn, they believed first and foremost in both the practical and transcendent power of knowledge. Teaching and learning, they felt, constituted not only the unique contribution they could bring to their young charges but perhaps the best therapy as well.

That was in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, before the post-modern psychology of the 1970s swallowed up modern psychology and most of education too, and began nibbling away at religion. Post-modern psychology reduced every problem in life to a question of self-esteem or the lack of it, blurring the boundaries between therapy and school, diluting both, and making

Commodore Hornblower beating to quarters somewhere off Cape Trafalgar. I never really understood why he had it in for the French, but knew I wanted to be on his side.

My teachers never worked at trying to develop my social conscience. They just gave me books. The things I read in public school broke down the Depression walls of my neighborhood and gave me a sense of a larger world.

I can't help but admire the daring of my teachers, who thought that they could draw a scruffy crew like us into the upper-crust circle of James Matthew Barrie's ironic comedies. Maybe it was the only hook they had, a left-over from the '20s, but I can still remember the poignant sense of the

unfairness of life I felt when the Admirable Crichton had to return downstairs to the butler's pantry after all he did on the deserted island for Lord Loam and his family.

And how could the paltry burden of my poverty compare with his noble sacrifice of giving up Lady Mary? I never gave a thought to the class system or whatever. It was just the way life was, not getting what you wanted or deserved, even in fairy tales.

All of us kids sensed that the school was trying to refine us, though we never felt patronized. No one was ever offended when our teachers looked at our nails or in our ears to see if they were clean. We were anxious to measure up, to be uplifted.

Every Friday we had music ap-

preciation. I never knew what was pomp and what was circumstance or why someone who must have been very religious to be called Saint-Saëns wrote music for skeletons to dance to. But I never doubted that it all had to do with something of what being a grownup was all about—something beautiful and mysterious, some puzzle that I might unravel some day.

It all was a little taste of some larger feast, and it helped ease the fear that must have nagged at all of us: that our lives would never get beyond those dreary boxcars and punched-out factory windows.

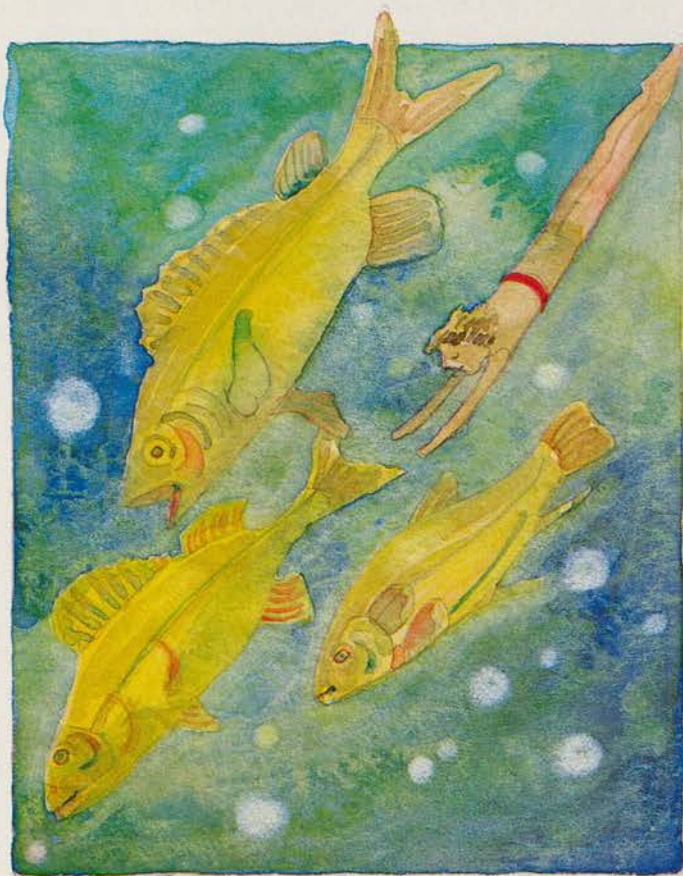
Elementary school told us that there was something else, after all. □

education a subservient profession. It mandated a new therapeutic approach to teaching, an approach that made a relentless focus on the self the order of the day in classrooms across the land.

Focus on the kids, not the subject matter, post-modern psychologists and their allies in the education bureaucracies told teachers; build their self-esteem and make them feel good about themselves. Don't expect them to get really absorbed in anything beyond themselves or to meet any external standards that seem foreign to them at the outset. Emphasize only those lessons that are of immediate relevance to them, and make sure they are easy enough for all students to succeed all the time, instantly, with no great effort on their part. And of course, feed them all a steady diet of praise, whether they are 3 or 13, and never criticize them. Don't tell them that there are standards and they're not meeting them yet. Don't tell them they have to work harder, dig deeper. Tell them that whatever they're doing is terrific already, and make them feel good now, immediately. That will build their self-esteem, and make them all happy and smart and good, all those non-teaching post-modern experts told teachers.

I call that the Self-Esteem-Now theory of educational and human development, and a lot of conscientious teachers tried hard to act in accordance with it in the past 30 years. The results were dismal—kids learned less, respect for teachers declined, disorder and violence and unhappiness increased, and a lot of Americans lost faith in schools and respect for teachers. A lot of teachers lost faith in themselves too, and in the healing and life-transforming potential of their own profession's magic, Merlyn's magic—the ancient, venerable, once and future magic of teaching and learning. The kind of teaching and learning that can only take place when standards are high and misguided notions about self-esteem are not allowed to trump them.

The renewed standards movement of the '90s gives today's teachers a chance to reclaim that magic and new backing to put it into practice, but there are still plenty of obstacles ahead, and post-modern psychology is one of the biggest. It gets its power from the enormous influence it has had, not just on teachers and on education bureaucrats and administrators, but on parents, and on lawyers and judges too, and of



course, on politicians—all the non-teaching “experts” who have been making rules for teachers and schools for the last three decades. Sooner or later, most teachers who raise standards and teach hard, as Merlyn did, will be confronted by angry critics who believe that self-esteem should continue to take priority over standards.

In coping with criticism of this sort, it helps to remember that psychology itself is not the enemy of high standards; the post-modern psychology of self-esteem is the problem. In coping with it, and answering criticism from its spear-carriers, it helps to look back to the psychology post-modern “experts” left behind when they embraced Self-Esteem-Now as the answer to all of life's problems. That older psychology took a much more complex and differentiated view of human development, and a much more re-

spectful view of the role of education in fostering it. It recognized the fact that self-esteem has a dark side, and that too much of the wrong kind at the wrong ages can be even more destructive in its impact than too little. [For a discussion of the relationship between inflated self-esteem and violence, see the article by Roy Baumeister on page 14.]

I tried to help teachers look at that older psychology in the pages of this magazine almost a dozen years ago, distilling out the essence of two of those older theories, then analyzing data and making predictions based on them, predictions that were the opposite of those made by Self-Esteem-Now theorists. But one dissenting voice wasn't loud enough to counter the mighty chorus of self-esteem salesmen of the 1980s. In the '90s, however, things are looking up. Now, at last, many voices are joining in, questioning post-modern ideas about self-esteem and recognizing some of the destructive effects they have had on our schools, our kids, and our lives. Skepticism is now so widespread that even the popular press is beginning to reflect it, as *Newsweek* did in its May 29, 1995, cover story.

The editor of this magazine has seen fit to reprint that 1985 article of mine in this issue. It's called “Self-Esteem and Excellence: The Choice and the Paradox,” and it begins again on the next page. We both hope it will help all of us to do just that: begin again, and bring the best of the timeless past back to the future. □

SELF-ESTEEM AND EXCELLENCE: THE CHOICE AND THE PARADOX

BY BARBARA LERNER

The article that follows first appeared in these pages almost a dozen years ago, in our Winter 1985 issue. We are publishing it again because its treatment of the topic remains so trenchant and timeless and because well-intentioned but misguided notions about self-esteem have become, if anything, even more deeply embedded in the culture of many, many schools. These notions get played out in various ways and constitute one of the most serious threats to the movement to raise academic and disciplinary standards and improve the learning opportunities and life chances of our nation's children.

—Editor

THE 1985-86 school year is likely to be a tense one for teachers. The Excellence Commission has spoken. The states have responded. Intellectual accountability is the order of the day. Mandated tests are mushrooming, and results are being demanded. Standards must be raised, and test scores with them. The pressure is on. Everyone must know more, learn faster, be smarter. And teachers must make it all happen.

Most teachers would like to do just that—there is no conspiracy against excellence—but it is one thing to say it, another to do it. How, after all, does a child's in-

Barbara Lerner, a psychologist and attorney, is president of Lerner Associates, a research and consulting firm in Princeton, New Jersey. Copyright © 1985, 1996 by Barbara Lerner.

telligence develop? How can teachers help each child to stretch and grow, and reach for excellence?

Today's teachers have been taught that self-esteem is the answer, and many believe that it is. Others, who don't, often face great pressure to conform to the prevailing view. Some have been effectively silenced, or driven out of the profession altogether. The result is that the role of self-esteem in learning has a special status. On a host of other pedagogical questions, teachers have varying viewpoints and express them freely. On this one, the settled answer goes largely unchallenged. Teachers generally seem to accept the modern dogma that self-esteem is the critical variable for intellectual development—the master key to learning. According to this view, children with high self-esteem forge ahead academically, easily and naturally; children with low self-esteem fall behind. They cannot achieve excellence, or even competence, in many cases, until their self-esteem is raised. That, at any rate, is assumption one in what I call the self-esteem theory of intellectual development.

Assumption two is that many children are in this boat because low self-esteem is common in childhood. It prevents many youngsters from learning and achieving and striving for excellence.

Two main implications follow from these assumptions. First, teachers must give priority to the task of raising children's self-esteem. To do this, they must accept each child just as he is, and provide him with constant praise and encouragement, seeing to it that

he experiences a feeling of success in school, as often and as immediately as possible. This is assumed to be helpful for all children and especially critical for children who are doing badly in school. If they can be taught to think better of themselves, their classroom work and behavior will improve, the theory tells us.

Implication two—that teachers must always act to protect children's self-esteem from injury—is the flip side of the coin, and just as important as promoting self-esteem. After all, if high self-esteem is the essential ingredient in superior intellectual performance, then anything and everything that could damage a child's self-esteem, however slight and transient the injury, is educationally counterproductive and should be eliminated from the classroom. Criticism always hurts self-esteem and should be avoided at all costs, and the same is true for academic and disciplinary standards. After all, children who fail to meet them are likely to feel bad about it, and about themselves as a result of it. That will lower their self-esteem, and increase the odds on future failures, the theory tells us.

IS IT a good theory? Will it really help today's teachers to develop excellence in their students? There are two main ways for teachers to judge. One way is to compare it to some contrasting theory to see which is more helpful in making sense of their own experiences with students in today's classrooms. The other way is to look at what has happened to American education as a whole over the last few decades, and then assess both theories in light of it.

Many teachers will be hard-pressed to think of a contrasting theory. The self-esteem theory of educational development has been the reigning orthodoxy for so long—a quarter of a century, now—that they were never taught anything else. Let me, then, offer two contrasts: the views of Alfred Binet, the father of intelligence testing, on the development of intelligence; and the views of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, on self-esteem in childhood.

Writing in the first decade of this century, Alfred Binet gave a very different answer to questions about what intelligence is and how it develops. He thought that a self-critical stance was at the very core of intelligence, its *sine qua non* and seminal essence. Not just a critical stance, which is quite compatible with the highest possible levels of self-esteem, but a *self-critical* stance, which is not.

He did not see self-criticism as an inborn trait, either. He thought children needed to be taught to engage in it, and to use it, habitually, to monitor and appraise their own performance, constantly looking for ways to improve it. He thought that was worth teaching, because children who learned to do it learned more about everything else as a result, and developed their intellectual powers more fully than children who didn't. That is why he saw self-criticism as the essence of intelligence, the master key that unlocked the doors to competence and excellence alike.

Binet thought self-criticism had to be taught precisely because it did not come naturally. Teachers, and the standards and discipline they imposed, were vital in his formulation. Without them, he thought children were likely to approach intellectual problems by ac-

cepting the first response that occurred to them, applauding their own performance quite uncritically, and then moving restlessly on, looking for more quick responses, more applause.

Binet's views on intelligence and its development were novel—he was a pioneer, there—but his views on the natural inclinations of children were not novel at all. They reflected a long-standing consensus among thoughtful adults who worked with children—teachers and others—that egotism is the natural state of childhood, high self-esteem the natural gift that accompanies it. Teachers who took this view saw it as their job to help children overcome their egotism, widening their view of the world, deepening their awareness of it, and learning to see themselves and their accomplishments in realistic perspective in order to take realistic steps toward excellence.

Teachers thought that standards—and criticism of academic work and classroom behavior that did not meet them—were essential elements in this learning process, and they did not worry too much about their impact on a child's self-esteem because they saw it as naturally robust, not fragile and in imminent danger of collapse without constant reinforcement. Like all compassionate adults, they recognized exceptions when they saw them and treated them accordingly, but they saw them as just that—exceptions—not a disproof of the general rule that self-esteem comes naturally, self-criticism does not.

BINET'S CONTEMPORARY, Sigmund Freud, provided powerful reinforcement for this view of childhood, and gave it new depth and resonance with his vivid descriptions of the long struggle of each human individual to move beyond the exclusive self-love of childhood and develop into a fully functioning adult, capable of loving others and of doing productive work. The heart of the struggle, as Freud described it, was to get out from under the seductive domination of the pleasure principle, accepting the reality principle instead, and acting in accord with it. The point of the struggle was to learn to make good things happen in reality, instead of just wishing they would and fantasizing about them, or trying to coerce or manipulate others into doing it for you.

Learning to reject the impulse to seek immediate gratification—focusing only on what feels good now—is one key step in this process. What feels good now is success, instant and effortless, in a fantasy world where the self is omnipotent, and all things exist to serve it. It is pleasant to live in this fantasy world, and very enhancing to self-esteem, but Freud believed that children who did not move out of it could not be successful, in love or in work. To be successful in either, in the real world, Freud thought that each of us had to struggle to break out of the shell of self-absorption into which we were born. We had to learn to focus our attention, at least part of the time, on the world beyond the self, and to tolerate the frustration and delay that is an inevitable part of learning to deal with it—learning to care for others, to work hard, and to persevere in the face of obstacles.

Breaking out of that shell and learning all of these things is not easy. It is not immediately enhancing to



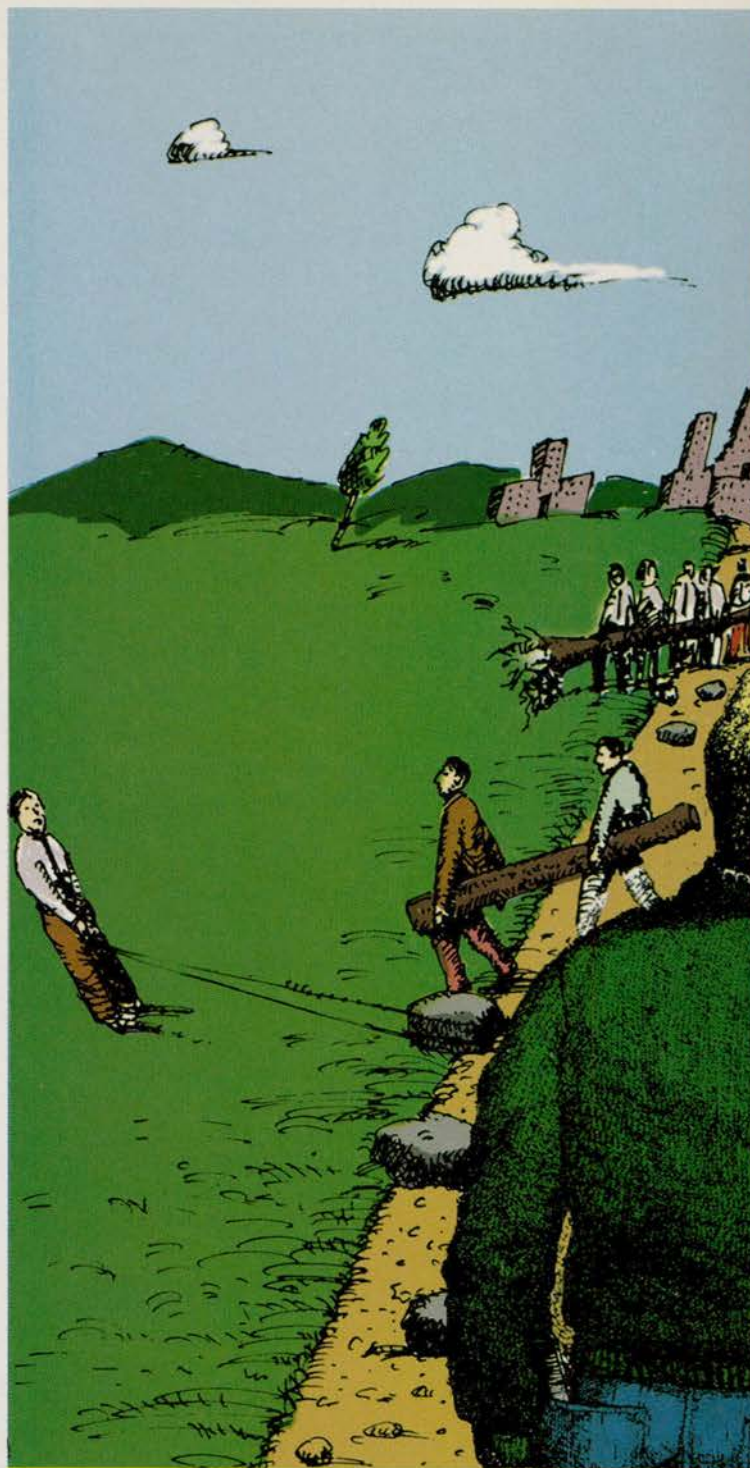
self-esteem of the infantile variety that Freud called narcissism, and I call *feel-good-now* self-esteem, either. Often, the immediate effect is deflating, particularly to highly inflated narcissistic egos, but the ultimate results—caring relationships with others, the development of competence, and a shot at excellence—do tend to build self-esteem of another, more durable sort. I call it *earned* self-esteem.

Earned self-esteem is based on success in meeting the tests of reality—measuring up to standards—at home and in school. It is necessarily hard-won, and develops slowly, but it is stable and long-lasting, and provides a secure foundation for further growth and development. It is not a precondition for learning but a product of it. In this, and in a host of other ways, it is the polar opposite of *feel-good-now* self-esteem. Standards, and demands on students to keep working until they really succeed in meeting them, are critical steps forward on the road to earned self-esteem. They are, simultaneously, steps back from *feel-good-now* self-esteem.

Teachers who believed in the old theories did not mind. They were comfortable, in earlier decades, emphasizing earned self-esteem at the expense of *feel-good-now* self-esteem, especially for older children. They were comfortable, in part, because they were convinced that that was the right thing to do, to help their students stretch and grow, and reach for excellence. In addition, it helped a lot that teachers could generally count on the support of their professional and administrative colleagues, and of the wider community, too. Today's consensus is very different, and today's teachers get a very different—indeed an opposite—message. *Feel-good-now* self-esteem is the only kind of self-esteem that the modern self-esteem theory of educational development recognizes for children of all ages, and schools of education have been telling teachers for a quarter of a century now that their prime job is to maximize it, assuring them that if they succeeded, their students would not only have high self-esteem, but would also stretch and grow, and reach for excellence.

WHICH THEORY is closest to the truth? Which one will best help today's teachers in their struggle to develop excellence in their students, this year, and in the years ahead? As we noted at the outset, one good way for teachers to re-examine these questions is to go back over their own past experiences—with students, classrooms, and schools—to see which theory is most helpful in making sense of them. Teachers whose past experience is short might also want to consult with fellow teachers who have been at it longer.

One useful way to start is to think first about the ways in which the self-esteem theory has been implemented in your school, because it is being implemented in most American schools today, in one way or another. The implementation process has been in motion for about a quarter of a century now, and it has made today's schools strikingly different from the schools of the 1950s, and of earlier decades. A recent book, *The Shopping Mall High School*, may be helpful here. In it, Arthur Powell, the senior author, provides



as vivid, intimate, and detailed a picture as I have yet seen in print, of what some American schools have come to look like under the domination of the *Self-Esteem-Now* theory of educational development. As such, it provides a useful reference point, a kind of academic photo album with which to compare your own school, and the classrooms in it. These comparisons are easiest for high school teachers to make, because all of the schools Powell and his colleagues studied were high schools. Still, I think his snapshots are candid enough to be evocative for grade school teachers too, and, with appropriate modifications, almost as relevant.

The Shopping Mall High School describes a system



Complementing the broad horizontal curriculum is a steep vertical one: courses with virtually identical titles but so staggeringly different in content, seriousness, and difficulty as to render their common name all but meaningless. Again, the purpose of this—and of similar latitude within as well as between classrooms in smaller schools, less able to specialize—is to avoid failure, to make sure no student is pushed to go any faster than he wishes to go.

Failure is anathema because success—*feeling* success—is so deeply cherished as both a goal and a means to other goals. Many teachers seem preoccupied by the psychological costs of failure and the therapeutic benefits of success. That was what one teacher was talking about when she said, “If you don’t get it done, you don’t fail. You don’t get credit, but you don’t experience failure.” “The most important thing to me is to make them feel they are human beings, that they are worthwhile,” another teacher emphasized. Still another’s primary goals were to “build confidence, to build trust...I try to affirm them as people.” A math teacher prescribed “a daily dose of self-respect.” And a social studies teacher explained why he didn’t stress thinking skills: “I just encourage them to make the most of their ability to have pride in themselves.” In all these instances, the need for students to feel success is disconnected from the idea of students mastering something taught....Mastery and success are like ships that pass in the night.

In the schools examined by Powell and his colleagues, students who choose to work hard and to reach for excellence are accommodated, and praised and encouraged; students who choose to do little or no hard work, reaching only for what feels good now, are also accommodated, and praised and encouraged even more. The assumption, in the modern Shopping Mall School, is that they need more praise and encouragement because their self-esteem is lower—that is why they do not work as hard.

Will more praise and encouragement help them to work harder, eventually, and to learn more? The Self-Esteem-Now theory tells us that it will, and that the extraordinary accommodations many modern schools make to give all students a feeling of immediate success are fully justified—necessary steps on the road to self-esteem and excellence. The old theories—the ones that it replaced—make opposite assumptions, and opposite predictions. They assume that most students have high self-esteem to begin with, and they predict that in contemporary classrooms like those described by Powell and his cohorts, grandiosity will be more common than excessive modesty. They assume that in those classrooms, many students will be preoccupied with fantasies and dreams of excellence—the warm flow of constant positive feedback is thought to be conducive to that, particularly in an atmosphere where few demands are made—but they predict that under these circumstances, few students will actually undertake the self-critical struggle necessary to achieve excellence in reality. Only their egos will swell

(Continued on page 41)

in which the concept of mastering an essential body of knowledge and skills gives way to the need to protect student self-esteem and to avoid discipline problems and dropouts. The vast array of courses—one school’s catalog featured over 400—is seen as a way for students to avoid failure.” The schools push “nobody beyond his or her preferences.” Indeed, they are remarkably neutral about those preferences, about whether “Tall Flags” is as valid a course choice as “Beginning French,” “Apartment and Income Properties Management” as essential as “Chemistry.” What *is* seen as essential is “for teenagers ‘to plug into something that gives them support,’” or as one student put it, “a curriculum that everybody can do.”

SHOULD SCHOOLS TRY TO BOOST SELF-ESTEEM?

Beware the dark side

BY ROY F. BAUMEISTER

“**W**E MUST raise children’s self-esteem!” How often has this sentiment been expressed in recent years in schools, homes, and meeting rooms around the United States? The sentiment reflects the widespread, well-intentioned, earnest, and yet rather pathetic hope that if we can only persuade our kids to love themselves more, they will stop dropping out, getting pregnant, carrying weapons, taking drugs, and getting into trouble, and instead will start achieving great things in school and out.

Unfortunately, the large mass of knowledge that research psychologists have built up around self-esteem does not justify that hope. At best, high self-esteem is a mixed blessing whose total effects are likely to be small and minor. At worst, the pursuit of high self-esteem is a foolish, wasteful, and self-destructive enterprise that may end up doing more harm than good.

Writers on controversial topics should acknowledge their biases, and so let me confess mine: I have a strong bias in favor of self-esteem. I have been excited about self-esteem ever since my student days at Princeton, when I first heard that it was a topic of study. Over the past two decades I have probably published more studies on self-esteem than anybody else in the United States (or elsewhere). It would be great for my career if self-esteem could do everything its boosters hope: I’d be dining frequently at the White House and advising policymakers on how to fix the country’s problems.

It is therefore with considerable personal disappointment that I must report that the enthusiastic claims of the self-esteem movement mostly range from fantasy to hogwash. The effects of self-esteem are small, limited, and not all good. Yes, a few people here and there end up worse off because their self-esteem

Roy F. Baumeister is the Elsie Smith professor of psychology at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between self-esteem and violence, see “Relation of Threatened Egotism to Violence and Aggression: The Dark Side of High Self-Esteem,” by Roy F. Baumeister, Laura Smart, and Joseph M. Boden (Psychological Review, 1996, Vol. 103, No. 1).

was too low. Then again, other people end up worse off because their self-esteem was too high. And most of the time self-esteem makes surprisingly little difference.

Self-esteem is, literally, how favorably a person regards himself or herself. It is perception (and evaluation), not reality. For example, I think the world would be a better place if we could all manage to be a little nicer to each other. But that’s hard: We’d all have to discipline ourselves to change. The self-esteem approach, in contrast, is to skip over the hard work of changing our actions and instead just let us all *think* we’re nicer. That won’t make the world any better. People with high self-esteem are not in fact any nicer than people with low self-esteem—in fact, the opposite is closer to the truth.

High self-esteem means thinking well of oneself, regardless of whether that perception is based on substantive achievement or mere wishful thinking and self-deception. High self-esteem can mean *confident* and *secure*—but it can also mean *conceited*, *arrogant*, *narcissistic*, and *egotistical*.

A recent, widely publicized study dramatized the fact that self-esteem consists of perception and is not necessarily based on reality. In an international scholastic competition, American students achieved the lowest average scores among all participating nationalities. But the American kids rated themselves and their performance the highest. This is precisely what comes of focusing on self-esteem: poor performance accompanied by plenty of empty self-congratulation. Put another way, we get high self-esteem as inflated perceptions covering over a rather dismal reality.

Looking ahead, it is alarming to think what will happen when this generation of schoolchildren grows up into adults who may continue thinking they are smarter than the rest of the world—while actually being dumber. America will be a land of conceited fools.

All of this might fairly be discounted if America were really suffering from an epidemic of low self-esteem, such as if most American schoolchildren generally had such negative views of themselves that they were unable to tackle their homework. But that’s not



the case. On the contrary, as I'll explain shortly, self-esteem is already inflated throughout the United States. The average American already regards himself or herself as above average. At this point, any further boosting of self-esteem is likely to approach the level of grandiose, egotistical delusions.

Benefits of Self-Esteem

Let us begin with the positive consequences of high self-esteem. Much has been claimed, but very little has been proven. Some years ago California formed a task force to promote self-esteem, and its manifesto was filled with optimistic assertions about how raising self-esteem would help solve most of the personal and social problems in the state. Here is a sample of its rhetoric: "the lack of self-esteem is central to most personal and social ills plaguing our state and nation," and indeed self-esteem was touted as a social vaccine that might inoculate people "against the lures of crime, violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, child abuse, chronic welfare dependency, and educational failure."¹

Such rhetoric is especially remarkable in light of another fact. That same task force commissioned a group of researchers to assemble the relevant facts and findings about self-esteem. Here is what the experts in charge of the project concluded from all the information they gathered: "The news most consistently reported, however, is that the associations between self-esteem and its expected consequences are mixed, insignificant, or absent."² In short, self-esteem doesn't have much impact.

Even when the occasional study does link low self-esteem to some problem pattern, there is often a serious chicken-and-egg ambiguity about which comes first. For example, if someone showed that drug-addicted pregnant unmarried school-dropout teenagers with criminal records have low self-esteem, this might mean only that people stop bragging after they mess up their lives. It would not prove that low self-esteem caused the problems. The few researchers who have tried to establish causality have usually concluded that self-esteem is mainly an outcome, not a cause. At best there is a mutual influence of spiraling effects.

To be sure, there are some benefits of high self-esteem. It helps people bounce back after failure and try again. It helps them recover from trauma and misfortune. In general, high self-esteem makes people feel good. Low self-esteem accompanies various emotional vulnerabilities, including depression and anxiety. (Again, though, there is no proof that low self-esteem causes these problems, or that raising self-esteem will prevent them.)

Children who do well in school have slightly higher self-esteem than those who do poorly. Unfortunately the effect is small, and in fact anyone who believes in the value of education should wish for a stronger effect simply on the basis that successful students *deserve* higher self-esteem. Across multiple studies, the average correlation between grades and self-esteem is .24, which means about 6 percent of the variance.³ In other words, moving from the very highest self-esteem scores to the very lowest would yield about a 6 percent difference in school performance. A small increase in self-esteem, such as might be produced by a

school program aimed at boosting self-esteem, would probably make only a 1 percent difference or less. And even that assumes that self-esteem is the cause, not the effect, contrary to many indications. To the extent that it is school success or failure that alters self-esteem, and not the other way around, any independent effort to raise self-esteem would have no effect at all on school performance.

Once again I must say how disappointing I've found these facts to be. Self-esteem is not altogether useless, but its benefits are isolated and minor, except for the fact that it feels good. When I embarked on a career of research on self-esteem, I had hoped for a great deal more.

The Dark Side of High Self-Esteem

The very idea that high self-esteem could have bad consequences strikes some people as startling. The self-esteem movement wants to present self-esteem as having many good and no bad effects. But very few psychological traits are one-sidedly good, and those few are mostly abilities (like intelligence or self-control). High self-esteem can certainly cause its share of problems. If you pause to recall that the category of high self-esteem includes people who think they are great without necessarily *being* great, this conclusion may seem less startling.

A large, important study recently adopted a novel approach to separating self-esteem from all its causes and correlates.⁴ The researchers measured how each individual rated himself or herself compared to how that person was rated by others who knew him or her. They were particularly interested in the category of people with inflated self-esteem—the ones who rated themselves higher than their friends rated them. This, after all, is where the self-esteem movement leads: Concentrate on getting kids to think well of themselves, regardless of actual accomplishments. The researchers had no difficulty finding plenty of students who fit that category. They are, in a sense, the star products and poster children of the self-esteem movement.

And what were they like? The researchers' conclusions did not paint an encouraging picture of health, adjustment, or success. On the contrary, the long-term outcomes of these people's lives found above average rates of interpersonal and psychological problems. A second study, with laboratory observations of live interactions, showed these people to be rather obnoxious. They were more likely than others to interrupt when someone else was speaking. They were more prone to disrupt the conversation with angry and hostile remarks. They tended to talk *at* people instead of talking *to* or *with* them. In general, they irritated the other people present. Does any of this sound familiar? This is what comes of inflated self-esteem.

The picture is one of a self-centered, conceited person who is quick to assert his or her own wants but lacks genuine regard for others. That may not be what the self-esteem movement has in mind, but it is what it is likely to produce. In practice, high self-esteem usually amounts to a person thinking that he or she is better than other people. If you think you're better than others, why should you listen to them, be considerate,

The very idea that high self-esteem could have bad consequences strikes some people as startling.

or keep still when you want to do or say something?

Over the past several years, I have been writing a book on evil and violence (*Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty*, to be published by Freeman this fall). Given my longstanding interest in self-esteem, I naturally wanted to acknowledge any part that it plays. Various pundits and so-called experts have long asserted that low self-esteem causes violence, but I've had enough experience with self-esteem to know that I'd better check the data rather than relying on vague generalizations and ostensibly "common" knowledge.

Two graduate students and I reviewed literally hundreds of studies on the topic. What we found was so surprising that, in addition to my book, we recently published a lengthy article in psychology's most eminent journal, the *Psychological Review*.⁵ We combined evidence from all spheres of violence we could find: murder, assault, rape, terrorism, bullies, youth gangs, repressive governments, tyranny, family violence, warfare, oppression, genocide, and more.

We concluded that the idea that low self-esteem causes violence is simply and thoroughly wrong. It is contradicted by a huge mass of information and evidence. People with low self-esteem are generally shy, humble, modest, self-effacing individuals. Violent perpetrators—from Hitler, Hussein, and Amin, down to the common wife-beater or playground bully—are decidedly not like that.

If anything, high self-esteem is closer to the violent personality. Most perpetrators of violence are acting out of some sense of personal superiority, especially one that has been threatened or questioned in some way. I am not saying that high self-esteem, per se, directly causes violence. Not all people with high self-esteem become violent. But violent people are a subset of people with high self-esteem. The main recipe for violence is *threatened egotism*—that is, a belief in personal superiority that is challenged, questioned, or "dissed" by somebody else. Inflated self-esteem often leads to that pattern.

Consider some of the evidence. In the first place, whenever there are two groups with different levels of self-esteem, the more egotistical group is nearly always the more violent one. The most familiar example is gender: Men have higher self-esteem and higher rates of violence. When self-esteem fluctuates, the risk of violence rises with the favorable views of self, such as in manic-depressive illness. Indeed, people who are in-

toxicated with alcohol show increases in self-esteem and increases in violent tendencies.

A recent study⁶ found that nowadays many homicides occur in connection with other crimes such as robbery, but in the remaining cases the homicide is often the result of an altercation that begins with challenges and insults, in which someone's favorable self-opinion is disputed by the other person. The person who feels he (or less often she) is losing face in the argument may resort to violence and murder.

Even within samples of offenders, it appears that indicators of egotism can discriminate violent and troublesome tendencies, and it is the favorable views of self that are linked to the worse actions. A group of researchers administered the California Psychological Inventory to young men (in their late teens) on parole.⁷ The researchers were able to predict future parole violations (recidivism) better than previous attempts. Among the traits that predicted high recidivism were being egotistical and outspoken (as well as "touchy," which suggests being easily offended). Meanwhile, being modest and unassuming (associated with low self-esteem) were among the traits linked to being least likely to violate parole. These results all seem to fit the view linking favorable views of self to violent tendencies.

Aggression starts in childhood, and bullies are the most notable examples. They are of particular importance because childhood bullies have been found to be four times more likely than other children to engage in serious criminal behavior during their subsequent adult life. Dan Olweus is an expert who has studied bullies for years, and he recently summarized the conclusions that his program of research has yielded. Unlike victims of bullying (who show multiple indications of low self-esteem), the bullies themselves seemed relatively secure and free from anxiety. "In contrast to a fairly common assumption among psychologists and psychiatrists, we have found no indicators that the aggressive bullies (boys) are anxious and insecure under a tough surface," said Olweus, adding that multiple samples and methods had confirmed this conclusion, and concluding that bullies "do not suffer from poor self-esteem."⁸

One of the most earnest and empathic efforts to understand the subjective experience of committing crimes was that of sociologist Jack Katz.⁹ Homicide as well as assault emerged in his study as typically caused by threats to the offender's public image. In Katz's view, the offender privately holds a positive view of self, but the eventual victim impugns that view and implicitly humiliates the offender, often in front of an audience. The response is unplanned violence resulting in injury or death. Katz insisted that feelings of being humiliated are quickly transformed into rage. He argued that many men feel that almost anyone can judge them and impugn their esteem, whereas for women self-esteem is most heavily invested in their intimate relationships—with the result that men will attack strangers while women mainly just murder their intimate partners, because only the partners can threaten their self-esteem to a sufficient degree to provoke such a violent response.

Another example of the relationship between in-

flated self-esteem and violence focuses on juvenile delinquency. The classic study by Glueck and Glueck compared juvenile delinquents against a matched sample of nondelinquent boys.¹⁰ Although the study was an early one and has been criticized on methodological grounds, it benefited from a large sample and extensive work, and nearly all of their findings have been replicated by subsequent studies. The Glueck and Glueck study did not measure self-esteem directly (indeed it antedated most modern self-esteem scales), but there were plenty of related variables. The pattern of findings offers little to support the hypothesis that low self-esteem causes delinquency. Delinquent boys were more likely than controls to be characterized as self-assertive, socially assertive, defiant, and narcissistic, none of which seems compatible with low self-esteem. Meanwhile, the delinquents were less likely than the comparison group to be marked by the factors that do indicate low self-esteem, including severe insecurity, feelings of helplessness, feelings of being unloved, general anxiety (a frequent correlate of low self-esteem), submissiveness, and fear of failure. Thus, the thoughts and actions of juvenile delinquents suggested that they held quite favorable opinions of themselves.

It is useful to look for convergences between the Gluecks' study and more recent studies of youthful violence, not only because of the seminal nature of the Gluecks' work, but also because their data were collected several decades ago and on an almost entirely white sample, unlike more recent studies. Converging findings thus confer especially high confidence in conclusions that can be supported across time and ethnicity.

One of the most thorough research projects on youth gangs was that of Martin Sanchez Jankowski, whose work involved 10 years, several cities, and 37 gangs.¹¹ Although as a sociologist he was disinclined to use self-esteem or personality factors as explanatory constructs, his study did furnish several important observations. Jankowski specifically rejected the notion that acting tough is a result of low self-esteem or feelings of inadequacy. In his words, "There have been some studies of gangs that suggest that many gang members have tough exteriors but are insecure on the inside. This is a mistaken observation" (p. 27). He said that for many members, the appeal of the gang is the positive respect it enjoys in the community as well as the respectful treatment from other gang members, which he found to be an important norm in nearly all gangs he studied. He said most gang members "expressed a strong sense of self-competence and a drive to compete with others" (p. 102). When they failed, they always blamed something external rather than personal inadequacy or error. This last observation is especially relevant because several controlled studies have shown that it is characteristic of high self-esteem and contrary to the typical responses of people with low self-esteem.

Recently I appeared on a radio talk show. The hostess seemed to have difficulty accepting the conclusion that low self-esteem is not a cause of violence, possibly because she had swallowed the propaganda line that all good things come from high self-esteem. To explain our findings, I offered the example of the Ku Klux

Far, far more Americans of all ages have accurate or inflated views of themselves than underestimate themselves. They don't need boosting.

Klan. The KKK has long advocated beliefs in white superiority and has turned violent in response to efforts to extend full equality to black citizens (thereby eroding the superior status of whites). I thought KKK violence was a good, clear example of threatened egotism.

For a moment the hostess seemed to see the point, but then she jumped back on the self-esteem bandwagon. "What about deep down inside?" she asked. I inquired whether she thought that Klansmen believed that they, as whites were inferior to blacks, which would fit the low self-esteem view. She balked at the word "inferior" but offered that the violent Klansmen believe deep down inside that they are "not superior"—in other words, equal—to blacks.

I didn't know what to say to this basically loony argument. Her theory that Klan violence could be traced to a "deep down" inner belief that blacks are equal to whites has two parts, both of which are bizarre: first, that members of the KKK truly believe in racial equality, and second, that belief in racial equality causes violence. It struck me that attempts to defend the self-esteem movement against the facts end up having to make such preposterous assertions.

Although this particular hostess's idea was absurd, she was invoking a point that the proponents of self-esteem have on occasion raised as a possibly valid defense. When obnoxious or socially undesirable acts are performed by egotistical people, thus contradicting the belief that high self-esteem is generally good, some propose that these obnoxious individuals must secretly have low self-esteem. Indeed, the editorial reviewers who evaluated our article on violence for the *Psychological Review* insisted that we tackle this theoretical question head-on in the final published version of the paper.

There are two main reasons to reject the "hidden low self-esteem" view. The first is that plenty of researchers have tried and failed to find any indications of this allegedly hidden low self-esteem. It's not for lack of trying, and indeed it would be quite a feather in any researcher's cap to show that actions are caused by low self-esteem hidden under a veneer of high self-esteem. Studies of childhood bullies, teen gang members, adult criminals, and various obnoxious narcissists keep coming to the same conclusion: "We've heard the theory that these people have low self-esteem or a negative self-image underneath, but we sure can't find

any sign of it.”

The other reason is even more compelling. Suppose it were true (which it does not seem to be) that some violent people have high self-esteem on the surface but low self-esteem inside. Which view of self (the surface veneer or the hidden one) would be the one responsible for violence? We already know that genuine low self-esteem, when *not* hidden, does not cause violence. Hence one would have to say that low self-esteem is only linked to violence when it is hidden. That means that the crucial cause of violence is what is *hiding* the secret insecurity—which means that the “ve-*neer*” of high self-esteem is the cause, and so we are back anyway to the position that egotism is the cause.

There isn't space here to exhaust the dark side of high self-esteem, but let me touch on a few other features. People with high self-esteem are less willing than others to heed advice, for obvious reasons—they usually think they know better. (Whether children with inflated self-esteem are less willing to listen to teachers is one possible implication of this, but to my knowledge this has not yet been studied.) They respond to failure by blaming everyone and everything but themselves, such as a flawed test, a biased or unfair teacher, or an incompetent partner. They sometimes extend their favorable self-opinion to encompass people close to or similar to themselves, but unfortunately this often translates into prejudice and condescension toward people who differ from them. (High self-esteem is in fact linked to prejudice against outgroups.) Finally, when their egotism is threatened, they tend to react irrationally in ways that have been shown to be risky, self-defeating, and even self-destructive.

Boosting Self-Esteem: The Problem of Inflation

Most (though not all) of the problems linked to high self-esteem involve inflated self-esteem, in the sense of overestimating oneself. Based on the research findings produced in laboratories all over North America, I have no objection to people forming a sober, accurate recognition of their actual talents and accomplishments. The violence, the self-defeating behaviors, and the other problems tend to be most acute under conditions of threatened egotism, and inflated self-esteem increases that risk. After all, if you really are smart, your experiences will tend to confirm that fact, and so there's not much danger in high self-esteem that is based on accurate recognition of your intelligence. On the other hand, if you overestimate your abilities, reality will be constantly showing you up and bursting your bubble, and so your (inflated) self-opinion will be bumping up against threats—and those encounters lead to destructive responses.

Unfortunately, a school system that seeks to boost self-esteem in general is likely to produce the more dangerous (inflated) form of self-esteem. It would be fine, for example, to give a hard test and then announce the top few scores for general applause. Such a system recognizes the successful ones, and it shows the rest what the important criteria are (and how much they may need to improve). What is dangerous

and worrisome is any procedure that would allow the other students to think that they are just as accomplished as the top scorers even though they did not perform as well. Unfortunately, the self-esteem movement often works in precisely this wrong-headed fashion.

Some students will inevitably be smarter, work harder, learn more, and perform better than others. There is no harm (and in fact probably some positive value) in helping these individuals recognize their superior accomplishments and talents. Such self-esteem is linked to reality and hence less prone to causing dangers and problems.

On the other hand, there is considerable danger and harm in falsely boosting the self-esteem of the other students. It is fine to encourage them to work harder and try to gain an accurate appraisal of their strengths and weaknesses, and it is also fine to recognize their talents and accomplishments in other (including nonacademic) spheres, but don't give them positive feedback that they have not earned. (Also, don't downplay the importance of academic achievement as the central goal of school, such as by suggesting that success at sports or crafts is just as good.) To encourage the lower-performing students to regard their performance just as favorably as the top learners—a strategy all too popular with the self-esteem movement—is a tragic mistake. If successful, it results only in inflated self-esteem, which is the recipe for a host of problems and destructive patterns.

The logical implications of this argument show exactly when self-esteem should be boosted. When people seriously underestimate their abilities and accomplishments, they need boosting. For example, a student who falsely believes she can't succeed at math may end up short-changing herself and failing to fulfill her potential unless she can be helped to realize that yes, she does have the ability to master math.

In contrast, self-esteem should not be boosted when it is already in the accurate range (or higher). A student who correctly believes that math is not his strong point should not be given exaggerated notions of what he can accomplish. Otherwise, the eventual result will be failure and heartbreak. Along the way he's likely to be angry, troublesome, and prone to blame everybody else when something goes wrong.

In my years as an educator I have seen both patterns. But which is more common? Whether boosting self-esteem in general will be helpful or harmful depends on the answer. And the answer is overwhelmingly clear. Far, far more Americans of all ages have accurate or inflated views of themselves than underestimate themselves. They don't need boosting.

Dozens of studies have documented how inflated self-esteem is.¹² Research interest was sparked some years ago by a survey in which 90 percent of adults rated themselves “above average” in driving ability. After all, only half can really be above average. Similar patterns are found with almost all good qualities. A survey about leadership ability found that only 2 percent of high school students rated themselves as below average. Meanwhile, a whopping 25 percent claimed to be in the top 1 percent! Similarly, when

(Continued on page 43)

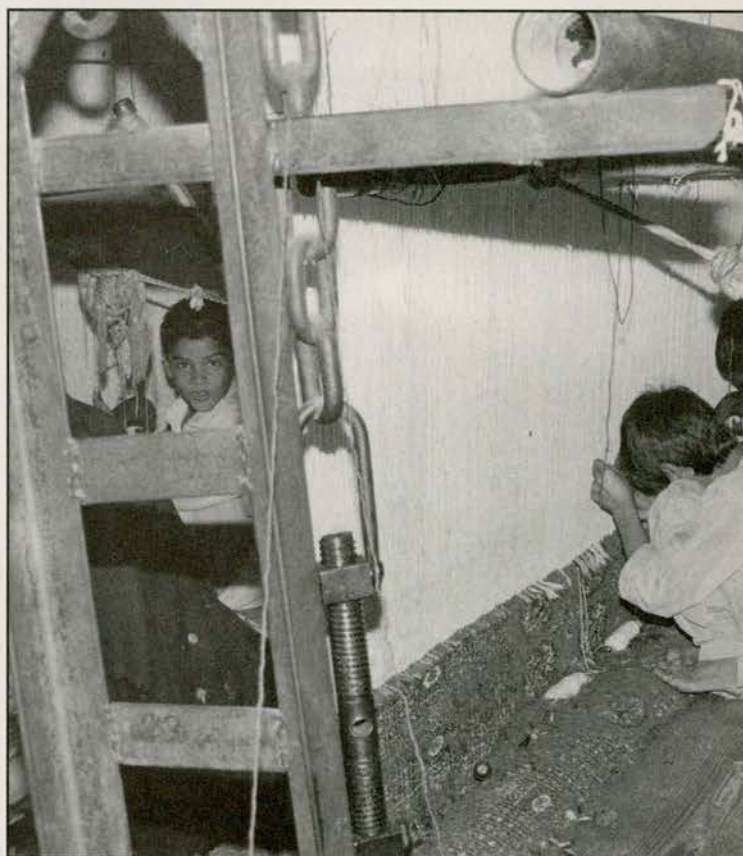
CHILDREN WITHOUT CHILDHOODS

BY MARCIA REECER

ALL OVER the developing world, children are being used and abused in factories, fields, and workshops. They are dragging containers of coal out of mines in Colombia and working barefoot in Pakistani brick kilns where they have no protection from the blazing heat in the summer or the cold in the winter. They are getting up in the middle of the night to pick jasmine blossoms in the muddy, mosquito-ridden fields of the Nile Delta. They are hand-sewing the soccer balls our kids play with and being paid 60 cents for a ball that costs \$6 to make and sells for \$30 to \$50 in a U.S. sporting goods store. They are crouching 14 or 16 hours a day in dark, airless, stinking sheds to make the handknotted rugs that are carried in upscale catalogs and stores here and in Europe. For the people who employ them, these children are commodities—cheap and expendable.

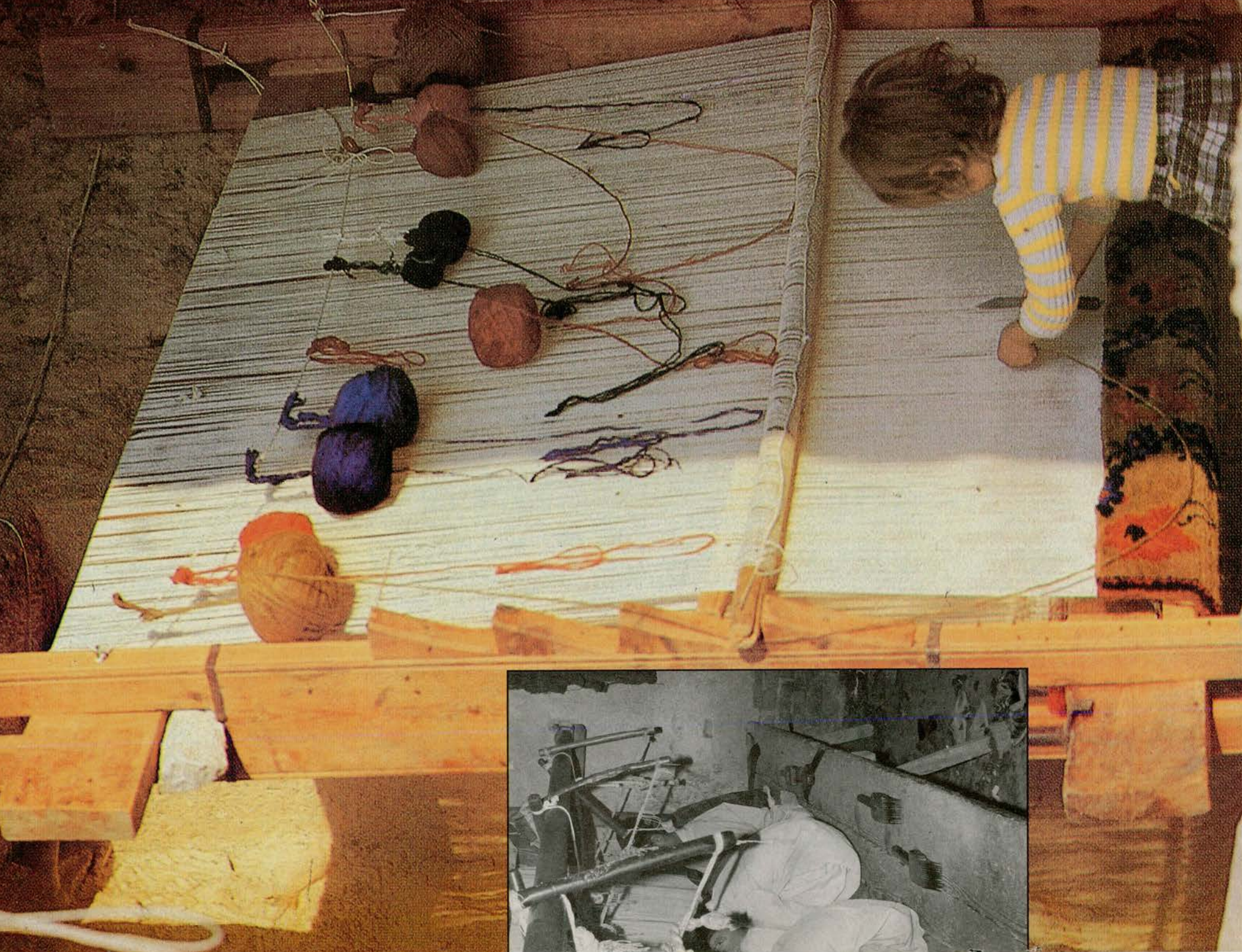
Most middle-class Americans would find it hard to imagine the conditions in which many of these children work—misery generally takes different forms in our country. It is not just that the work they do often taxes their strength and stamina to the utmost or that they are poorly paid—and sometimes not paid at all. Many labor in foul and even dangerous workplaces where their health is permanently damaged—brick-making children, who constantly breathe quartz dust, are likely to get tuberculosis or silicosis; the children who make rugs develop spinal deformities from crouching at their looms day after day, and their eyesight is damaged by the poor light in which they work. But the horror is multiplied by the often unbelievable abuse that some working children suffer. The worst stories are of children who are treated like slaves. These are the bonded laborers, sold by their families to rug or brickmakers or glass blowers or owners of

Marcia Reecer is associate editor of American Educator.



PHOTOS: AFL-CIO AAFLI

Child labor is used to make rugs (right) in Turkey and (above) in Pakistan.





Like Pakistani child brick workers, these Colombian children assist in the making of bricks.

PHOTO: ILO

fireworks or match factories, usually for a small sum of money that the child's work is supposed to repay (though owners seldom admit that it has). Here is how Irfana, a Pakistani child who was handed over to the owner of a brick kiln when she was six and freed from bondage when she was 10, described her life to reporter Jonathan Silvers:

My master bought, sold, and traded us like livestock, and sometimes he shipped us great distances. The boys were beaten frequently to make them work long hours. The girls were often violated. My best friend got ill after she was raped, and when she couldn't work, the master sold her to a friend of his in a village a thousand kilometers away. Her family was never told where she was sent, and they never saw her again.

Of course, not every child who works suffers the abuse of an Irfana, but that does not mean we should confuse the work done by children who labor in the developing world with the fast-food jobs our middle-class students take on in their spare time. Even under the best circumstances, these children are likely to work long hours for a fraction of what an adult would get for doing the same job—and they are usually de-

prived of the opportunity for an education.

How many children are working worldwide? We don't really know. Many countries, including some of the worst offenders, have laws against employing children under the age of 13 or 14, particularly in jobs that are dangerous or physically demanding. So even if they are lax about enforcing these laws, there are unlikely to be very good statistics about working children. However, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that between 100 million and 200 million children under the age of 15 work. More than 95 percent live in the developing world, and Asia accounts for over 50 percent, which is why so many of the discussions of child labor focus on this part of the world. The South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude (SACCS), a leading Indian child-advocacy organization, estimates that 55 million Indian children work (the government says 18 million, but even that, the *National Journal* points out, is as large as the entire labor force of Canada). SACCS also estimates that, in South Asia alone, one million children are bonded laborers: 500,000 in Pakistan; 300,000 in India; and 200,000 in Nepal.

There is nothing new about child labor. In some places and industries, children work side by side with their parents as they always have. Or, again following traditional ways, they are apprenticed to craftsmen to learn their trades. But increasingly children are being sent out of their homes and communities to work in factories and shops where they are likely to be abused

and exploited. This is especially true in countries eager to produce export goods that will be competitive in the new world markets. However, the global nature of trade also opens to scrutiny industries that are making products for export. Prompted by activists here and in the countries where child labor is rampant, consumers are starting to ask, "Who made this

A CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

SOME OF the strongest voices being raised against child labor are those of young people whose lives have been touched by the life and death of Iqbal Masih.

Seventh graders at Broad Meadows Middle School in Quincy, Massachusetts, met Iqbal when he came to Boston in 1994 to receive a human rights award from Reebok. He visited their school and talked to them about his life as a bonded laborer and his plans to be a lawyer and advocate for other children who were enslaved. He told them that one of his dreams was to have a school in the Pakistani village where he was born. When they heard he had been murdered, the students decided to fulfill his dream.

They sent out letters, fliers, and messages on the Internet describing the "School for Iqbal Fund" and asking for \$12-dollar contributions—a number they chose because Iqbal was 12 years old when he died and because he was sold to the rug-maker for \$12. Originally they hoped to raise \$5,000 to build a one-room school, but by July 15 of this year they had received \$114,000 from students and others in 50 states and 13 countries. They will continue the campaign until the end of 1996.

The money they raise will go to establish the Iqbal Masih Education Center, a school for 200 poor Pakistani children who have either been bonded laborers or are at risk of being sold. It will also provide money for 50 families in Pakistan to buy back their children from bondage, and it will form part of an endowment to support the school in the future. The students from Broad Meadows Middle School hope to dedicate their "School for Iqbal" on April 16, 1997, the second anniversary of his death.

When Craig Kielburger, now an eighth grader in Toronto, Ontario, read about Iqbal Masih's death, his

response was to found an organization called Free the Children that is devoted to advocacy for children's rights. Free the Children, whose members are people between the ages of 8 and 18, has a web page that gives information about child labor and suggestions about what young people should be doing to end it.

Last year, Craig made a seven-week trip to India and Pakistan and participated in one of Kailash Satyarthi's raids to free some bonded child workers. According to media reports, he also upstaged Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien who was in India on a trade mission. Child labor was apparently not part of Chretien's agenda, but reporters

said that it became so when Craig held a press conference with two of the children who had just been released from bondage.

Free the Children is also raising money for a center that will rehabilitate children who have been freed from bonded labor and for schools to be set up in rural areas. The plan is that these schools will give children a meal a day and two pounds of rice for attending, which is more than the children could get for going to work.

The address for the Broad Meadows web site, "A Bullet Can't Kill a Dream," is <http://www.digitalrag.com/mirror/iqbal.html>

The address for the Free the Children web site is <http://www.schoolnet.ca/ext/community/freechild/action.html>

(At left) Iqbal Masih, former bonded child laborer, visits Broad Meadows Middle School, Quincy, Mass., December 1994.

Broad Meadows students holding photos of Iqbal and singing "This Song is for the Children," are shown in the picture below, which was taken at the annual General Meeting of Amnesty International, Boston, Mass., June 1996.


PHOTO: BILL GRANT/©THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR



PHOTO: RON ADAMS







Children who work at potentially hazardous tasks are not supplied with protective gear.

soccer ball?" "Who grew these flowers?" And "under what conditions?"

None of Our Business?

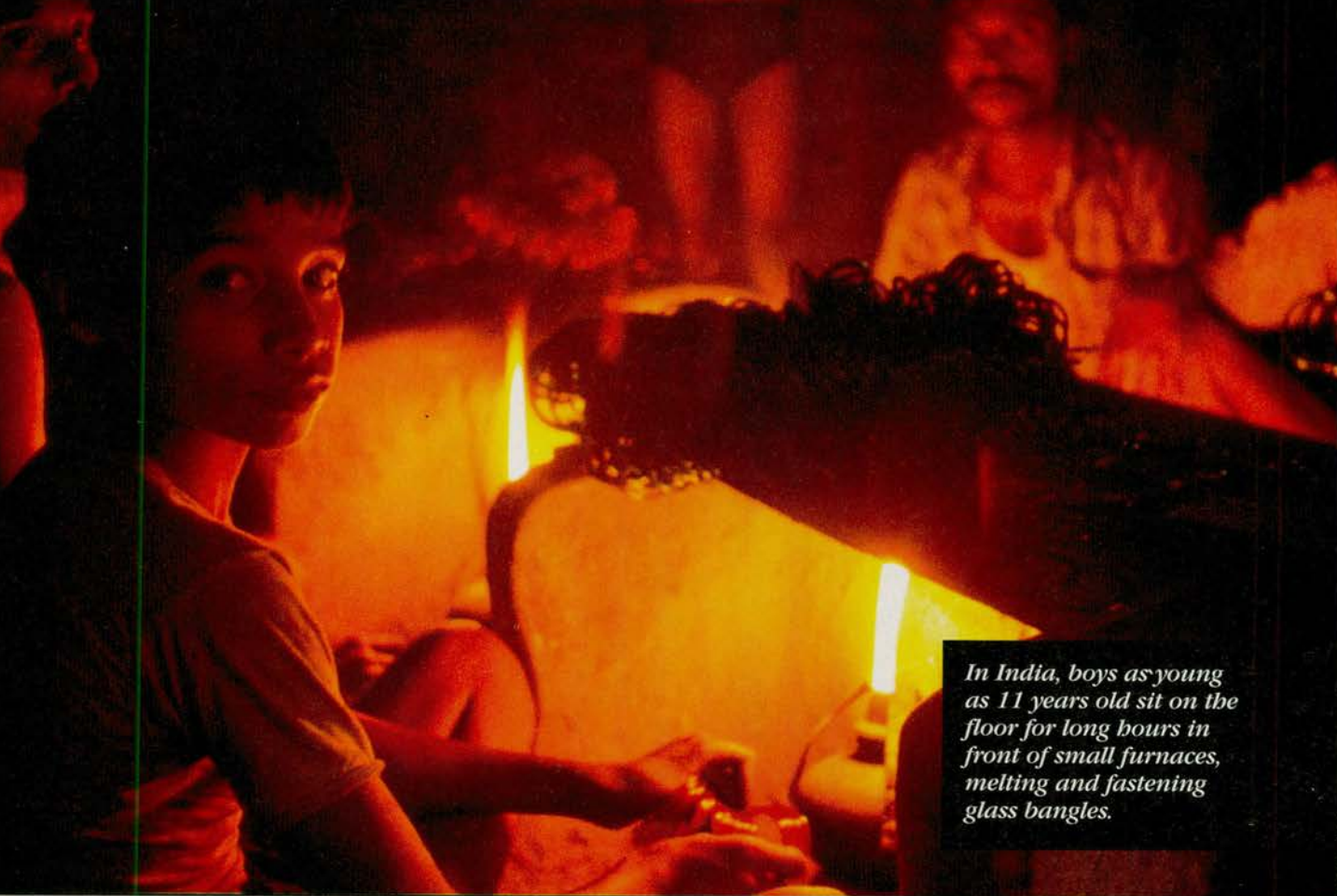
Some people say that labor conditions in other countries, however repellent to us, are none of our business. For example, there is the familiar plea of cultural relativism. Here's how one official of a U.S. company with an overseas operation put it when reporter Sydney Schanberg brought up the issue of child labor: "Pakistan is a very different culture. We can't just sit back and say whether it's right or wrong." But even if you buy the idea that what is immoral in one culture is not necessarily immoral in another, Pakistan in fact has laws against employing children under the age of 14, and laws specifically prohibiting bonded labor. So when we criticize a company there that employs children or turns a blind eye to the existence of bonded labor, we are not merely applying our standards; we are also applying theirs. The same is true of other countries that are coming under scrutiny because of their child labor policies—India, Nepal, Bangladesh. Hiring children may be a local custom, but it is against their laws as well as ours.

The conditions under which a product is made also become our business when people want to sell us the product. When child labor policies were being hammered out in this country, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes made a comment about states' rights that is relevant here: States "may regulate their internal affairs and their domestic commerce as they like. But when they seek to send their products across the state line they are no longer within their rights."

Some claim that the economic arguments in favor of child labor are harder to refute. They go like this: Child labor is a result of poverty and will disappear when poverty does. In the meantime, developing nations need to be able to throw their children into the workforce (and keep them out of school). Efforts on the part of well-meaning people to put an end to child labor will only impede these countries' progress toward modernization—and harm the very children they want to help.

But some Asian countries—South Korea and Sri Lanka—have demonstrated that universal education can precede development. And perhaps employing children, who are always cheaper than adults, is a cause of poverty rather than a cure for it, in part because it creates a downward pressure on adult wages and in part because it delays the development of an educated workforce. Why shouldn't companies employing children employ out-of-work adults instead? That is what Kailash Satyarthi, the founder of SACCs and a leader of South Asia's crusade against child labor believes: "Today in India we have 55 million children in servitude and an equal number of unemployed adults. No government can scale down unemployment without curbing child labor." Dan McCurry of the International Labor Rights Fund makes a similar argument in connection with the soccer ball industry in Pakistan. Children, he says, make 20 percent to 25 percent of the soccer balls; at the same time there is a 75 percent unemployment rate among adults in the region where the soccer ball industry is concentrated.

PHOTO: ILO



In India, boys as young as 11 years old sit on the floor for long hours in front of small furnaces, melting and fastening glass bangles.

PHOTO: ILO

Clearly, employing children here is a choice, not a necessity.

The explanation that many companies would probably give is that they would no longer be competitive if they hired the children's parents. Perhaps. But the International Labor Organization (ILO)'s answer is that labor costs make up only a fraction of the total cost of production. So replacing children with adult workers would raise these costs by an average of 8 percent in India or Nepal. This would not be enough for the industry to lose its market share in industrialized countries, though it would cut down on the profits. But suppose consumers who do not want to buy products made with child labor organize to support companies that employ adults only?

What Can We Do?

However inhumane and self-serving some of the arguments against ending child labor sound, there are practical problems associated with rooting out the practice. If an American company buys a handbag or a blouse or a rug from an importer who buys it from a middleman who buys it from a company that contracts out the making of the article to a number of small operators, it can be genuinely difficult to establish whether or not a child worked on it even if you want to—especially since it is in the interest of so many people in this chain to lie or avert their eyes.

In addition to these practical problems, there are cultural and social conditions, unrelated to the greed or indifference of companies, that make it difficult to eradicate child labor. Experts generally agree that the best way to end to child labor is to dry up

the supply of children by putting them in school. That is why most efforts at helping children escape from repressive workplaces include making sure they have schools to attend. But in many developing countries, laws mandating compulsory free education, when they exist, are as little regarded as laws prohibiting child labor. There may also be attitudes about work and education related to the class and, in some cases the caste, of working children. In other words, there is no easy formula that will lead to the end of child labor in the near future. This does not mean that we should just relax and forget about the issue.

Exerting a direct influence over another country's political and social policies can seem like a big order. Nevertheless, ordinary people who buy products made in developing countries do have influence. And they can exert it if they organize to support companies that abandon child labor. One example of how this can be done is the *Rugmark* campaign. It focuses on the handknotted rug industry where child labor—in fact bonded labor—is known to be a big problem. *Rugmark* is a nonprofit foundation established by Kailash Satyarthi, founder of SACCS, who has also been involved in freeing bonded child laborers. The idea is to inspect and certify companies whose rugs are not made with child labor. The companies agree to surprise inspections of all their looms. They also number rugs according to the loom on which they are made in order to help importers verify that no child labor has been involved. And consumers recognize rugs that are certified by the foundation when they see the smiling carpet label shown here.



Rugmark, is now two years old. It has been endorsed by UNICEF and signed up 15 percent of the companies making handknotted rugs in India. So far, most of these rugs have gone to Germany. But *Rugmark* has begun certifying rugmakers in Nepal, another area which has been known for abusive child labor practices, and it has enlisted 70 percent of the rugmakers there. The first *Rugmark* rugs in the U.S. were auctioned off in April 1996, at a ceremony commemorating the death of Iqbal Masih, a Pakistani child rights activist, who was sold to a rugmaker when he was 4, freed when he was 10, and mysteriously murdered in April 1995 at the age of 12 (see sidebar on page 23). *Rugmark* was recently registered as a non-profit foundation in the U.S. This means it will be able to deal directly with consumers and rug importers in this country. Will *Rugmark* be able to have a significant influence on the way handknotted carpets are made in India and Nepal? That depends on whether consumers start demanding carpets with the *Rugmark* label—and importers are able to supply them.

Another form of leverage consumers can sometimes have is through a company's concern for its image. A U.S. company that manufactures products abroad might listen carefully to demands that it stop using

child labor in its overseas operations—if it was worried about tarnishing its image. Pharis Harvey of the International Labor Rights Education and Research Fund describes how some well-known U.S. multinational companies reacted to the news that child labor was being used in their overseas operations. Speaking on the radio program "All Things Considered" last year, Harvey said that, once the companies found that some of their subcontractors had been using child labor,

they took rather rapid steps to try to distance themselves from the practice. I believe that is primarily because those companies have an image to maintain, and the image of producing high-quality, high-cost garments on the labor of small children is not what [they want]....American consumers want bargains...that are produced under conditions that make them proud to wear what they buy. And I don't think anybody can be proud of wearing something knowingly that has been produced at the cost of the life of a small child.

Reebok's plan to restructure its soccer ball operation in Pakistan is a prime example of how a company's desire to protect its image can lead to profound changes in how it does business. Reebok, which is proud of its reputation as a humane and responsible company, was recently made aware that child labor is used in making the soccer balls it imports to sell under its label. As a result, the company is restructuring its operation to rule out the use of child labor. According to a letter by Peter Moore, a senior vice president of the company, Reebok will stop sending soccer ball panels out to be stitched in villages, a practice that makes it difficult to control who, in fact, is doing the sewing. Instead, it will build a plant where all the sewing will be done and which will employ no workers under the age of 15, the legal age for working in Pakistan. The letter also recognizes the important link between education and the end of child labor. It states that "Reebok will support educational and/or vocational training for children in the soccer ball manufacturing region of Pakistan." So far so good.

"A Flood of Articles"

When *American Educator* last ran an article about child labor in the developing world seven years ago, the picture was grim. The outlines of the problem were the same as they are now, but there seemed to be little awareness about child labor in this country or elsewhere in the developed world. It was as Robert Senser, one of the authors of the *Educator* article recently put it, "a neglected topic." Now, Senser says, there is a "flood of articles." But it isn't just reporters and commentators who are paying attention. Ordinary people are starting to express their disgust at being offered products made with child labor. Our best weapon now is more of the same. Adults—and children, too—need to ask questions about the products they find in their local stores and write letters to companies. Teachers need to encourage their students to investigate who makes the soccer balls they play with and the clothes they wear. All of us need to let everyone involved in making and selling the products we buy know that we want to put an end to child labor—and we need to keep the pressure on. □

SOME RESOURCES USED IN WRITING THIS ARTICLE

By the Sweat and Toil of Children: The Use of Child Labor in American Imports (1994, 1995).

Free from the Bureau of International Affairs, Room 51308, U.S. Dept. of Labor, Washington, D.C. 20210 (fax 202-219-4923).

Articles by Sydney Schanberg ("Six Cents an Hour," *Life* magazine, June 1996); Mark Schapiro ("Children of a Lesser God," *Harper's Bazaar*, April 1996); Jonathan Silvers ("Child Labor in Pakistan," *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1996); Robert A. Senser ("Outlawing the Crime of Child Slavery," *Freedom Review*, November/December 1993); Charles D. Gray and Robert A. Senser ("Children Who Labor," *American Educator*, Summer 1989).

Human Rights for Workers Bulletin, ed. Robert A. Senser, <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/hrw/bu8.htm>

Child Labor Coalition, c/o the National Consumers League, 1701 K St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006 (phone 202-835-3323) for information about the *Rugmark* campaign.

International Labor Rights Fund, 110 Maryland Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20002 (phone 202-544-7198) for information about the *FoulBall* campaign to ban soccer balls made with child labor.

Most of these resources can be found in a teachers kit available from the International Affairs Department of AFT, 555 New Jersey Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (fax 202-879-4502 or e-mail: iadaft@aol.com).

ETHNICITY AND ADOLESCENT ACHIEVEMENT

BY LAURENCE STEINBERG

WITH B. BRADFORD BROWN AND SANFORD M. DORNBUSCH

An important new book offers fascinating summertime reading for anyone interested in trying to unravel the reasons underlying the relatively poor performance of American students. Entitled Beyond the Classroom, the book's authors argue that out-of-school factors have enormous, perhaps decisive influence on student achievement. Drawing in large part from survey data gathered from 20,000 high school students over a three-year period, the authors examine student attitudes and values—what they think of school and learning, how they use their nonschool time, the norm of "getting by." The authors look at the role of parents and peers and culture. The article that follows is excerpted from this compelling new work.

—Editor

ONE OF the many strengths of our study was the ethnic variety in our sample. Unlike most research on adolescent development, which is based on samples of White youngsters (and middle-class White youngsters at that), our sample is ethnically and socioeconomically heterogeneous. Research on such varied populations is extremely important because, by the end of this century, ethnic minority youth will make up about one-third of the adolescent population. Although our sample was not deliberately recruited to reflect exactly the national population of teenagers, more than one-third of the participants in our study were minority youth, approximately evenly divided among youngsters from African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic-American families.

Laurence Steinberg is professor of psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia. B. Bradford Brown is professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and research scientist in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. Sanford M. Dornbusch is Reed-Hodgson professor of human biology and professor of sociology and education, emeritus, at Stanford University. This article is excerpted from Beyond the Classroom by Laurence Steinberg. Copyright © 1996 by Laurence Steinberg. Reprinted by permission of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Although we did not intend our study to focus primarily on ethnic differences in achievement and other aspects of adolescent development, we were struck repeatedly by how significant a role ethnicity played in structuring young people's lives, both inside and outside of school. Youngsters' patterns of activities, interests, and friendships were all influenced by their ethnic background. Moreover, we could not ignore the fact that students from different ethnic groups experienced markedly different degrees of success and failure in school. Like other investigators, we found that students of Asian descent are doing far better in school than are members of other ethnic groups, and that Black and Latino adolescents are doing significantly worse. We cannot attribute these patterns simply to ethnic differences in socioeconomic status—even within a specific social class, Asian students outperform White students, who in turn outperform Black and Latino students. This is not to say, of course, that there aren't plenty of exceptions to this pattern—Asians who are doing poorly, and Black and Latino students who are doing very well. But the general pattern of ethnic differences was marked and consistent across the nine schools we studied.

Venturing into the realm of ethnic differences in achievement is a difficult and delicate matter today, with racial divisions in this country at an extremely high level, and with heated and often uninformed debates in the popular press about genetic bases for ethnic and racial differences in intelligence and behavior. There will be readers who will be angry at what I say, if not simply at my colleagues and me studying ethnicity and achievement at all. That ethnic differences in achievement persist even after we take into account differences in social class only makes matters worse, because this suggests that the patterns cannot be dismissed as mere reflections of differences in economic resources. But our findings on ethnicity and achievement are just too important to ignore. Moreover, as you will read, they inform the more general issues of the declining achievement of American youth. Until we really understand the causes of this problem, we will not be able to solve it.



A Few Words About Ethnicity

A few preliminary words are in order about what we mean by ethnicity. We deliberately use the term "ethnicity," and not race, because we see it as a measure of individuals' cultural background rather than their biological ancestry. In keeping with other social scientists who study ethnicity, we use the term "ethnic group" to refer to a group of individuals who share certain fundamental patterns of culture, history, values, and beliefs.

In grouping youngsters by ethnicity, we employed a categorization scheme similar to that used by other social scientists, namely, one that asks individuals to classify themselves into one of seven categories: Asian, Black, Latino, non-Hispanic White, American Indian, Middle Eastern, or Pacific Islander (the specific instruction was "Select the one major ethnic group that best describes you"). We had insufficient numbers of students in our study from three categories (American Indian, Middle Eastern, and Pacific Islander) to draw statistically reliable conclusions about any of these ethnic groups, so in analyses designed with ethnic comparisons in mind, these youngsters were not included. Thus, when I write about ethnic differences or similarities in one or another aspect of adolescent development, I am referring to youngsters in one of four major ethnic groups: Black, Asian, Latino, or White. In analyses in which ethnicity was not a consideration—for example, if we simply wanted to examine the relation between school achievement and time spent in extracurricular activities—all of the students in our sample were included.

Any attempt to group individuals into categories defined by ethnic background is necessarily imperfect, even if individuals are classifying themselves. Any superordinate ethnic category necessarily mixes groups of individuals who come from various cultural backgrounds. The category we call "Asian," for example, combines individuals of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Southeast Asian, and South Asian descent—cultures that in numerous respects are quite diverse. Similarly, the category we call "Latino" is composed of students whose relatives come from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Central America, Mexico, and South America—again a rather varied group of backgrounds. The White youngsters in our sample generally were of European descent (in our study, "White" refers to non-Hispanic White youth), but this, of course, includes individuals from backgrounds as different from each other as Great Britain, Poland, and Greece.

We made the decision to use these broad categories knowing full well their limitations. But in our judgment, the alternatives—using more fine-grained categories or ignoring ethnicity entirely—were equally problematic. Further divisions of the groups into smaller categories (e.g., classifying youngsters in terms of their family's specific country of origin, or using concrete indicators such as fluency in one or another language, or adherence to certain cultural customs) is also imperfect, since even these categories frequently combine individuals from different cultural origins (e.g., rural versus urban Mexico, northern versus southern China, Protestant versus Catholic Irish, African individuals born in Africa versus African indi-

viduals born in America). Moreover, using a more fine-grained classification scheme would result in having very small numbers of individuals in any given category, rendering statistical analyses virtually impossible.

There are those who might argue that in light of these difficulties we should not have used ethnicity as a classifying variable at all. Indeed, had our study been conducted several decades earlier, when social scientists downplayed ethnicity in favor of socioeconomic status, we might not have studied ethnicity. Today, however, ethnicity is an exceedingly important variable in social science research as well as public life generally. In contemporary America, ethnicity emerges as just as important a factor in defining and shaping individual experience as does social class or gender. Whether we like it or not, individuals use ethnicity in everyday life to classify themselves and others in an attempt to organize and understand their world. And, especially given the well-documented and widely reported findings concerning ethnic differences in achievement in this country, it would have been foolish, if not scientifically dishonest, to ignore this variable in our research.

This is not to say that we ignored other relevant information about individuals' ethnic background. Our surveys included detailed questions not only about the adolescent's self-categorization, but about the specific ethnic background of the adolescent's parents or step-parents, the family's immigration history, the languages spoken by the adolescent and the significant people in his or her life, and the adolescent's feelings and beliefs about his or her ethnic identity. These questions permitted us to perform more detailed analyses—examining, for example, how students whose families have recently come to the United States differ from youngsters of the same ethnic background, but whose families have been in America for several generations, or how different patterns of language use are related to school achievement among Latino or Asian youngsters.

Ultimately, the classification system we employed made the most sense in light of the particular research problem we were studying—adolescent achievement in American high schools in the late 20th century. Dividing the world into the four-way scheme we ended up with—Asian, Black, Latino, and White—made sense, not only to us as researchers, but to the adolescents, their parents, and school personnel. A different research question, or one studied at a different time or in a different setting, might well have required a different basis for classification. In the final analysis, the utility of the categorization scheme we employed is borne out by the fact that it helps to account for differences in patterns of behavior. If the scheme were unreasonable, or foolhardy, or wrong, the findings it yielded would be less consistent and less interpretable.

Why Study Ethnicity?

One might think that studying ethnicity and achievement is the same as studying group differences in scholastic performance. Our investigation into ethnic differences in achievement was not primarily a documentation of differences in levels of achievement, however. The ethnic differences in achievement we found had been reported by numerous investigators

long before we began our study. Our approach was aimed at understanding *why* such differences exist. What is it about Asian students that helps account for their above-average record? Why are Black and Latino students faring worse in school than their White or Asian peers? How can we account for individual students who are not performing as well as, or as poorly as, other members of their ethnic group? Are the factors that explain achievement similar or different as we move from one ethnic group to another?

The answers to these questions, it turns out, are far more complicated than the simple stereotypes that are so often (and often erroneously) casually exchanged. More important, in taking on these questions—questions about the underlying causes of ethnic differences in achievement—we were able not only to illuminate the issue of ethnicity and school performance, but to better understand the factors that affect *all* students' achievement. All of us, regardless of our personal background, have much to learn by examining why some groups are succeeding in school at far higher rates than others, and, as well, why some groups are performing so poorly.

Let me begin with a summary of what we found when we contrasted the school performance of students from different ethnic groups.

Ethnic Differences in Student Achievement and Engagement

One of the most consistent observations reported by social scientists who study school achievement in this country is that Asian-American students perform, on average, substantially better than their White peers, who in turn outperform their Black and Latino counterparts. This finding has emerged over and over again, whether the index in question is based on school grades or performance on standardized tests of achievement. What is especially remarkable about the ethnic group comparisons of achievement is that they hold up even after taking into account other factors that might contribute to ethnic differences in performance, such as differences between ethnic groups in family income, household composition, or parental education.

We find precisely the same pattern of ethnic differences in our sample as other researchers have reported. That is, even when we compare students from identical social backgrounds, we still find that Asian students are outperforming their classmates who attend the very same schools, and that both Asian and White youngsters are achieving more than Black or Latino students. Although there are social class differences in school performance *within* every ethnic group—differences that favor, as one would expect, children from wealthier, more educated families—the differences *between* ethnic groups are not simply due to ethnic differences in income or parental education. That is, Asian students from low-income

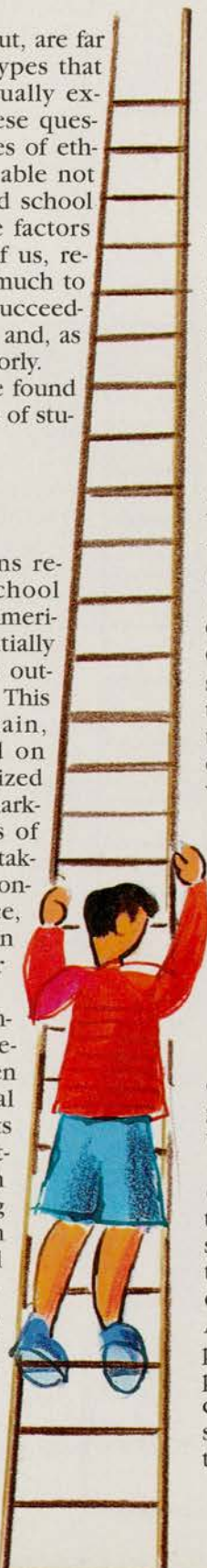
homes outperform comparably disadvantaged White, Black, and Latino students, and low-income White students score higher than comparably disadvantaged Black or Latino students; middle-class Asian students outperform middle-class Whites, who, in turn, outperform middle-class Black and Latino students; and so on. In other words, even though Black and Latino students are more likely to come from less advantaged backgrounds than White or Asian students, this difference in family resources does not fully explain the difference in the groups' school performance.

Nor can the difference be attributable to differences in the schools youngsters attend, since we find these ethnic differences even among youngsters enrolled in the very same schools. In fact, the relative standing of ethnic groups in their school performance was virtually identical across each of the nine schools we studied—in schools in both Wisconsin and California; in urban, suburban, and rural schools; in predominantly White and in predominantly minority schools. Across these very different settings, students of Asian descent were succeeding at a higher rate than all other students, and students of Black and Latino descent were achieving at a lower rate.

How large are the achievement differences we see when we compare ethnic groups, however? Whereas the average Asian students in our study were earning a mixture of A's and B's in school, other students were averaging grades of B's and C's, with White students earning more B's than C's, and Black and Latino students earning more C's than B's. Although these differences may not seem large at first glance, differences in grades of this magnitude clearly have genuine and important implications for how youngsters fare after completing high school. Put concretely, a student who graduates with a mixture of A's and B's on his or her transcript stands a much better chance of being admitted to a selective university than one with more C's than B's.

Group averages tell only part of the story. It is also important to look at the distribution of grades in each ethnic group, to get a sense of the range of student performance. After all, a group can end up with an overall average of C by having a high proportion of students earning C grades, or by having large numbers of students earning both A's and F's. How did the ethnic groups fare when we looked at their grades in this fashion?

White students' grades, in general, are tightly distributed around a B average, with two-thirds of the White students in our sample earning grades somewhere between B- and A-. What this means, therefore, is that relatively few White students are earning either very high *or* very low grades. Among Asian students, in contrast, close to 55 percent had grade-point averages of A or A-, compared with 35 percent of White students, 19 percent of Latino students, and 16 percent of Black students. At the other end of the spectrum, fewer than 10 percent of the Asian students had aver-



ages of C or lower, as opposed to 20 percent of the White students, 34 percent of Black students, and 38 percent of the Latino students.

We can look at this pattern in yet another way, by asking how the grades given out within a school are distributed across the ethnic groups. Here again we see the same basic pattern: Although Asian youngsters represented only 13 percent of our sample, they accounted for 27 percent of the students in our sample with straight-A averages, and 20 percent of the students with A- averages. Whites, who account for a little more than 60 percent of our sample, account for the same proportion of students with A or A- averages. In contrast, although Black and Latino students made up nearly one-fourth of our sample, they accounted for only 7 percent of the students with straight-A averages. Black and Latino students accounted for more than 40 percent of all the students in our sample with grade-point averages of C- or below.

These ethnic differences, as I mentioned earlier, were quite consistent within each of the different schools in our research, a finding that argues against the idea that the ethnic differences we observed are actually differences between schools or communities. If, for example, all of the Asian students were attending schools in which grading practices were liberal, and all of the Latino students were attending schools in which grading practices were more stringent, we could not tell if any observed ethnic difference in grades was really due to ethnicity or, instead, to the different schools' grading policies. For this reason, it was important to see if the ethnic differences in grades observed in the sample as a whole were also reported within each school. And they were.

Specifically, in every single high school community we studied, Asian students were earning a far higher proportion of the A's given out than would be expected by the sheer number of Asian students alone. In one school, for example, although Asian students accounted for only 8 percent of the student body, they accounted for nearly one-third of the students with straight-A averages! In contrast, Black and Latino students were always underrepresented among students with high averages, and always overrepresented among students with grades of C- or lower. White students were almost always clustered in the middle of the distribution, overrepresented among students earning B's, and underrepresented among those earning either very high or very low grades.

I noted earlier that the differences in school grades we observed among ethnic groups are large enough to make a difference in youngsters' future educational and occupational careers. We can also place ethnic differences in grades in perspective by comparing them to the differences we find when we contrast students regarding other demographic variables, such as gender, social class, household compo-

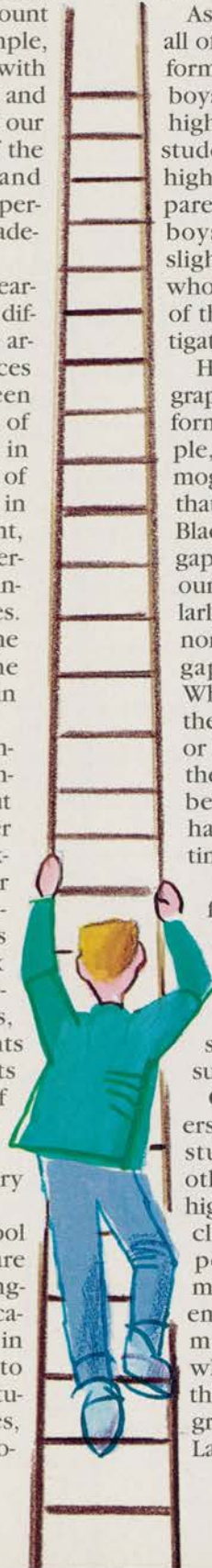
sition, or mother's employment status. For each of these demographic variables, we calculated the "net" effect of the variable in question after taking into account all of the other variables. Thus, we were able to estimate how much ethnicity "matters" after taking into account social class, household composition, gender, and maternal employment. Similarly, we were able to ask how much household composition matters after taking into account ethnicity, class, gender, and maternal employment, and so on.

As one would expect based on previous research, all of these factors are related to students' school performance. On average, girls earn higher grades than boys; youngsters from more affluent families earn higher grades than those from poorer households; students whose parents have never divorced earn higher grades than those who reside with a single parent or in a stepfamily; and students (especially boys) whose mother is employed full-time earn slightly lower grades than students with a mother who is not employed or works only part-time. Many of these findings have been reported by other investigators, and none of them is especially surprising.

Here's the big surprise, though: of all the demographic factors we studied in relation to school performance, ethnicity is the most important. For example, even after we take into account the other demographic variables that make a difference, we find that the gap in grades between Asian students and Black or Latino students is nearly twice as big as the gap between students from the poorest families in our sample and those from the most affluent. Similarly, the gap between students from divorced and nondivorced homes is substantially smaller than the gap between the grades of White and Black or White and Latino students, and less than a third of the size of the gap between Asian and either Black or Latino students. In terms of school achievement, then, it is more advantageous to be Asian than to be wealthy, to have nondivorced parents, or to have a mother who is able to stay at home full-time.

Asian students are not merely distinguished from students of other backgrounds by their superior school grades and scores on standardized tests of achievement, however. Asian students also are significantly more engaged in school than their classmates—not really a surprise, since stronger engagement both leads to and results from higher grades.

Consider students' scores on some of the markers of engagement that we used in our study. Asian students spend more time on homework than other students. They cut class less often, report higher levels of attention and concentration during class, and report less mind-wandering. They report being confused less often but challenged more often—a combination that certainly suggests emotional engagement in the classroom. On our measure of overall orientation toward school, which assesses how important a priority students think school is, Asian students outscore all other groups by a wide margin. In contrast, Black and Latino students spend significantly less time on



homework than White or Asian students do, and this is not due to the fact that Black and Latino students are assigned less homework. Rather, Black and Latino students are more likely to report that they do not do all of the homework that they are assigned.

That we find ethnic differences in engagement, as well as in achievement, is extremely important. Some commentators have suggested that one reason for the greater success of Asian students, compared with White, Black, or Latino students, is their superior native intelligence. Our results suggest that this is unlikely. (Interestingly, other studies directly examining the genetic explanation have failed to support the view that Asian academic success is due to genetic advantages in intelligence.) A more reasonable reading of the evidence is that Asian students perform better in school because they work harder, try harder, and are more invested in achievement—the very same factors that contribute to school success among *all* ethnic groups. Indeed, as one of my colleagues once quipped, if Asian students were truly genetically superior to other students, they would not be spending twice as much time on homework each week as their peers in order to outperform them.

These strong and consistent ethnic differences in school achievement and engagement shed important light on the ongoing debate over school reform. One interpretation of our findings is that perhaps the school reform under consideration in some quarters is not the key. After all, the Asian students in our study were achieving high grades and maintaining strong engagement in the classroom despite the alleged deficiencies of their schools.

Similar conclusions have been reached in other studies. In one widely cited piece of research, the social scientists examined the achievement of Asian youngsters from Indochinese refugee families. These students came to the United States under enormously difficult conditions, with few economic resources and limited proficiency in English. All of the participants in the research went to school in poor, metropolitan areas—environments, as the researchers pointed out, that are hardly known for producing academic success. Indeed, these are the “disadvantaged urban schools” identified in so many reports as having the lowest levels of average student achievement in the country. Yet, despite all of these hardships, the Indochinese refugee children performed exceptionally well in school and on standardized tests of achievement, bettering in many cases their non-Asian counterparts for whom English was their native tongue. Whatever the faults of American schools—even those in the inner city—apparently some students are able to succeed in them. While this observation, of course, does not justify the continued existence of poor-quality schools, it does suggest that factors other than school quality must play an important role in determining student achievement.

Explaining Ethnic Differences

To what can we attribute the relative superiority of Asian students in school and the relatively poor showing of Black and Latino students? As I have suggested, we cannot explain these differences away as an artifact

of other differences in background, such as social class or household composition. And, because we find the same pattern of ethnic differences *within* schools as we do in the sample as a whole, we can be confident that the differences are not due to youngsters from different ethnic groups being enrolled in different schools. But what about discrimination within schools? Could it be the case that the lower grades of Black and Latino students are a product of teachers' discrimination, and that the higher grades of Asian students are due to teachers' favorable biases toward them?

Although many social critics believe that overt discrimination against Black and Latino students by teachers is rampant, the scientific evidence for this view is not strong. For example, studies show that the assignment of students to higher or lower tracks in high school is not heavily biased in terms of ethnicity, and track assignment is surely an instance where racial discrimination, if strong, would be manifested. Rather, research shows that students tend to be assigned to tracks on the basis of their past performance, and not their social background.

Nor do we see much evidence for the “prejudiced teachers hypothesis” in our own data. For instance, we asked students to report how often teachers at school were “unfair or negative” to them because of their ethnic background. In every ethnic group, reports of discrimination by teachers were rare. Although ethnic minority students in our study (and especially Black students) reported slightly more unfair or negative treatment by teachers than White students did, ethnic differences in levels of reported discrimination by teachers were much smaller than ethnic differences in achievement. Second, our analyses found that ethnic differences in school grades persist—and, in fact, are just as strong—after we take ethnic differences in perceived discrimination into account. In other words, whether we look separately at the group of students who report high levels of discrimination or separately at the group of students who report no discrimination, we see the same pattern of ethnic differences in school performance. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Asian students and Latino students report identical levels of discrimination from teachers, even though the groups' grades are, as we have seen, quite far apart.

On the face of it, it would seem difficult to attribute ethnic differences in school performance to blatantly unfair or biased treatment by teachers. But there is a different version of the “discrimination hypothesis” that is frequently invoked, one concerning discrimination outside of school, in the broader society. Specifically, some writers have suggested that ethnic differences in school performance are due to differences in youngsters' perceptions of their chances for economic and occupational success as adults. This is one version of what has been called the “glass-ceiling hypothesis.”

The Glass-Ceiling Hypothesis

One popular view is that school success is linked to students' perceptions about the likely economic rewards of academic accomplishment. An extension of this view is that ethnic differences in school achieve-

ment are due to ethnic differences in students' beliefs about the importance of doing well in school. One widely cited theory, for example, is that Black and Latino students do not achieve as much success in school as other students chiefly because they do not believe that academic success will have a significant payoff. According to this view, because Black and Latino students anticipate discrimination and prejudice in the labor force, they have little faith that scholastic success will actually lead to concrete economic rewards, and, as a consequence, they exert relatively less effort in school.

Is the higher level of achievement seen among Asian students, and the lower level of achievement seen among Black and Latino students, due to their having different beliefs about the payoff for academic success? That is, are Asian students more engaged in school because they are more likely than other students to have faith that doing well in school will pay off? Do Black and Latino students succeed less often because they do not share this belief?

The answer, interestingly enough, is no. When we examined students' responses on questions concerning the likely economic and occupational rewards of school success, we found no ethnic differences in how students answered these questions. In other words, Asian, Black, Latino, and White students are all equally likely to say that getting a good education (that is, going far enough in school) will have a genuine payoff down the road. And despite the popular belief that students have lost faith in the value of school to their futures, we found very few students—of any color—who do not believe that getting a good job is dependent on how many years of school one completes.

Where students did differ, however, was in their beliefs about the consequences of *failing* in school. We not only asked students if they thought that getting a good education would lead to a good job; we also asked if they thought that *not* getting a good education would hurt their chances in the labor force. It was in response to this latter question that we found the most striking ethnic differences.

By a substantial margin, Asian students were more likely than other students to believe that not doing well in school would have negative consequences for their future. In contrast, non-Asian students were less likely to hold this belief—they were far more cavalier about potential negative effects of doing poorly in school. If anything, then, Asian students are successful not because of their stronger belief in the payoff for doing well, but because they have greater fear of the consequences of not doing well. It is undue optimism, not excessive pessimism, that may be holding Black and Latino students back in school. Their problem isn't that they have lost faith in the value of education; the problem is that many Black and Latino students don't really believe that doing poorly in school will hurt their chances for future success. The truth, of course, is that academic failure *does* affect the occupational and economic success of Black and Latino students, just as it does among their White and Asian peers.

Beliefs About the Causes Of Success and Failure

Having students believe that it is worth investing time and energy in school is a necessary condition for academic achievement, but it is not sufficient by itself. In order to succeed, students also must believe that they have some control over how well they do in school, that their performance is somehow related to their effort, and that trying harder will lead to an improvement in their grades and test scores.

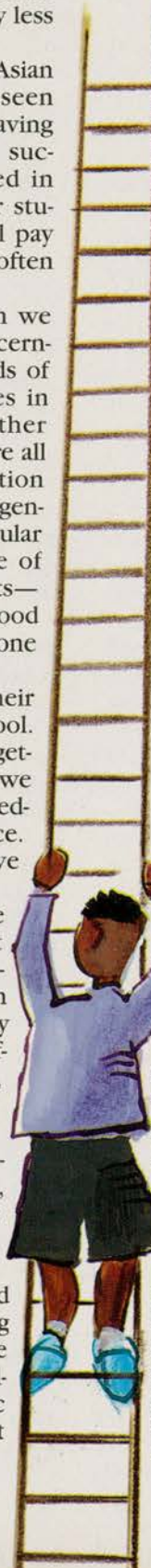
For some time now, psychologists have studied the ways in which we try to make sense out of what happens to us and, in particular, in the ways in which we explain our successes and failures. In the research literature, these explanations for success and failure are referred to as *achievement attributions*.

In our study, we carefully measured students' achievement attributions. We asked whether they believed the grades they received were due to personal factors (for instance, ability or effort) or to external factors (for example, the teacher's attitude, the difficulty of the material) and, as well, whether they attributed their performance to factors they had some control over (e.g., effort) versus those that they did not (e.g., luck). We asked these questions about both good and bad grades. Based on students' responses to these questions, we were able to classify them as having basically healthy or unhealthy attributional styles.

Students with healthy attributional styles believe that their performance in school is due to personal factors that are under their own control. They view success as the product of hard work, and failure as the result of insufficient effort. Although they are confident in their abilities, these students do not view their performance as fixed by their intelligence. More important, students with a healthy attributional style do not attribute their performance to external factors, such as how hard or easy the material is, whether their teachers like or dislike them, or whether they have good or bad luck.

At the other extreme are students with an unhealthy attributional style. These students downplay the role of effort in school success and failure. When they succeed, they view their accomplishment as the result of innate ability, an easy assignment, favorable treatment by teachers, or just plain good luck. When they fail, they attribute their performance to unfair teachers, bad luck, low innate ability, or having to confront an exceptionally difficult test, all factors over which they have no personal control.

Our studies, as well as a good deal of other research, clearly show that a student's attributional style is significantly predictive of his or her performance in school. Successful students, on average, are more likely to attribute their academic accomplishments to hard work and their occasional failures to a lack of effort. Unsuccessful students, in contrast, are more likely to see



their performance as due to factors that are beyond their personal control.

What is especially interesting about our findings on achievement attributions, however, is the pattern of ethnic differences we observed. Asian students are significantly more likely than Black, Latino, or White students to have a healthy attributional style—that is, to see their success and failure as directly linked to how hard they work. Conversely, Asian students are less likely than other students to see success or failure as resulting from things outside their personal control, such as luck or the favoritism of teachers. This view—that effort is what really counts—is an important part of the belief system among youngsters (and adults) in Asian countries as well. Our study suggests that this cultural difference in beliefs is likely to be one reason for the superior showing of Asian students, both here and abroad.

The problem of unhealthy achievement attributions is pervasive within the United States. Compared with individuals from other cultures, Americans are far more likely to believe that success in school is dependent on native intelligence, that intelligence is fixed—either by genes or early experience—and that factors in the emotional and social realms play only an insignificant role in students' academic success. When we observe differences in students' test scores, we are likely to attribute both successes and failures to differences in students' talents, and we are likely to convey this message in the ways that we speak about success and failure in school (e.g., "You're just not good at science, honey"; "You've always been good at languages"; "You've done well in algebra because you're such a 'math whiz'").

These messages about the immutability of talent take hold in our children's minds at an early age. I saw this a few years ago in our son's account of why he received a B on a math test. To put this in proper perspective, Ben had just transferred to a new school that, unlike his old one, gave letter grades on students' exams and assignments. At his old school, his teachers had corrected students' homework and examinations, but had not graded them per se. Ben had been at his new school for about six weeks when he brought home a math test on which he received a B.

I asked Ben if he knew why he had gotten the grade that he had received and, more important, if he knew what he could have done to have gotten a better grade. He looked at me, obviously upset at his performance and still trying to figure out how much his grades meant to his parents. "Suppose I'm just a B student?" he asked. "Then this is what I would expect to get."

I tried to explain to him that there was no such thing as a "B student"—that the grade he had received referred to his *exam*, not to him. But all the while I wondered how he could have so quickly transformed an evaluation of his work into a statement about his ability. Clearly, the message we give to students—you are what your grades say you are—is dangerously strong and salient, from a very early age.

Students, teachers, and parents in other parts of the world are far less likely than Americans to use the language of ability when discussing student performance.

They are more likely to attribute differences in achievement to differences in students' motivation (how much they want to succeed), effort (how hard they exert themselves), or behavior (how much time they devote to their studies). Success, in their eyes, is not the outcome of inborn talent, but the product of systematic, motivated, hard work.

It is ironic that in the United States, a country that prides itself so much on its national "work ethic," we should place so little faith in hard work and so much in native ability. I suspect that one reason for the popularity of *The Bell Curve* is that its central premise—that intelligence, and therefore success, is fixed by genetic inheritance—is widely accepted as part of American folk "wisdom," even though the evidence for this belief is very weak. As you'll read later in this article, our findings concerning the drop in achievement that occurs as ethnic minority youngsters become acclimated to the American way of life indicate that school achievement is unlikely to be genetically determined.

The Myth of Asian-American Misery

About 10 years ago, *The New York Times* published an op-ed piece I wrote on the achievement gap between our students and Japan's. In that brief essay, I argued that the achievement gap was real, that it was indeed something to worry about, and that we had better address it. What were some of the "radical" suggestions I made? That American students spend more time on their studies and less time slinging hamburgers in fast-food restaurants, shopping, and partying with their friends; and that parents become more involved in their children's education. Shortly after the essay appeared, I heard from a 10th-grade social studies teacher from a school district in upstate New York. He had asked his students to read the essay and send me their responses.

The 10th-grade students' letters (which, incidentally, were written at about the sixth- or seventh-grade level) were uniformly critical of my piece. Yes, it is true, they wrote, that Japanese students outperform us in matters of achievement. But, they countered, how well rounded were those Japanese students? They might be *smarter*; one student wrote, but we're *happier*. And "everyone" knows about the high suicide rate among Japanese adolescents.

The notion that Asian students' academic success has taken a toll on their mental health and personal happiness is often used by American adolescents and parents to argue against steps we might take in this country to raise our own students' level of scholastic accomplishment. Yet it may come as a surprise to learn that the stereotype of the miserable Asian achiever is without foundation.

For example, contrary to popular belief and media hyperbole, the adolescent suicide rate today is higher in the United States than in Japan—and it has been higher for nearly 20 years. The notion that suicide is rampant among Japanese adolescents was valid 40 years ago, but is no longer so today. The suicide rate among Japanese adolescents peaked in 1955 and has declined steadily since then. Among American adoles-

(Continued on page 44)

LIFE WITH MARK

BY ARCH PUDDINGTON

BACK IN the summer of 1980 my wife, Margaret, our then-18-month-old son, Nicholas, and I spent several weeks in a dreary resort in the lower Catskills. It was there that we met the Ducks.

The Ducks were a group of mildly retarded young adults who were enjoying a holiday at the same hotel. I believe it was Margaret who bestowed the designation on them, because of the fierce attachment one of their number seemed to have developed for a Donald Duck flotation device kept in the swimming pool for the use of children. His name was Herb, and in contrast to the other Ducks, who were friendly and outgoing, Herb was withdrawn and more than a little strange. He would spend hours stroking the resort owner's cat, and once planted himself in the middle of a busy intersection in a nearby village where he proceeded to direct traffic until the local police intervened. Herb's favorite occupation, however, was paddling up and down the pool supported by the duck float, which he regarded with the same kind of nervous jealousy a young child reserves for a treasured toy. Losing possession of the float would send him into a state of visible agitation, and while he never contested any child for the object, the act of restraining himself took all the limited patience he could summon. Calm returned only when the precious thing was restored.

The Ducks were topic number one among the guests and—especially—the staff, who regaled us with stories of their various adventures. There were many such tales, for the Ducks, despite their condition, went everywhere, took part in every activity, and appeared blessedly unaware of what the world thought of their presence. In the condescending gossip and quiet

Arch Puddington is writing a history of Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty. He works for Freedom House in New York. This article is reprinted from Commentary, May, 1996, by permission; all rights reserved.

mockery, Margaret and I took part without a second thought.

We have had many opportunities to reflect on our encounter with the Ducks in subsequent years. Margaret was seven-months pregnant during our stay in the Catskills, and we soon learned that the child she was carrying was to be far more handicapped than the marginally retarded group who had provided us with so much diversion.

WE WORRIED about Mark almost from the beginning. He slept constantly, cried and fretted much less than would be expected of a normal child, and failed to sit upright or crawl at the appropriate months. At about one year, Mark suffered a major seizure, and was then diagnosed as both mentally retarded and physically handicapped. Eventually, doctors were able to conclude that Mark was afflicted with a relatively rare condition called Cornelia de Lange syndrome.

Mark shares many of the physical characteristics of de Lange children: a roundish, somewhat oversized head, thick eyebrows, unusually small hands and feet. He has also, quite unfortunately, been cursed with some of the bodily complaints common to the condition. His balance is precarious; he cannot run or jump; and he walks with a lurching, wobbly gait. At 15, he is physically unable to pronounce more than a handful of intelligible syllables (though his hearing is normal). Since he cannot chew properly, we must remain vigilant lest he ingest any food that might cause him to choke. Mark has had orthopedic surgery on both feet, and has an arthritic hip which could be the source of serious trouble down the road.

As is the case with many multiply handicapped children, Mark's intelligence is not easy to pinpoint. His IQ was once evaluated at 36, one point above the upper limit for the most severely retarded category. Later, however, we were startled to discover him capable of expressing his needs, his feelings, and even complex



thoughts through sign language, or by spelling out sentences on a letter board, with Margaret's assistance. This process is known as facilitated communication, a technique in which those with little or no speech are physically supported while they spell out their thoughts by pointing to letters of the alphabet on a message board, or by typing on computers.

Facilitated communication has generated more than its share of controversy, largely because evidence gathered by this method from autistic children has figured in several widely publicized cases of apparently bogus charges of sexual abuse. Mark himself has revealed his inventiveness by concocting stories about imaginary school friends or class outings which never took place. But facilitated communication has also enabled him to let us know that he is aware he is different and is sad that he cannot play or have friends like normal children. Once, in a store with Margaret, Mark, apparently assuming he was the intended object, became upset at someone's passing remark about a retarded child. Demanding the letter board, he angrily spelled out, "I am not retarded. Not!" On another occasion, after I had exhibited impatience over the tediousness of his routine, he told Margaret: "I would like to be normal, but I am not." (My punctuation in both cases.)

Still, while Mark can—incredibly—spell out in English letters the first few sentences of the Hebrew blessings over Sabbath dinner, he appears unable to follow the plot of a television cartoon or a *Sesame Street* skit. He also refuses to play by himself, and is satisfied only when someone—usually Margaret or I—participates in one of his infantile games, answers his incessant questions (usually posed through gestures and usually having to do with promised adventures), leads him on a tour of the local shops, or otherwise pays exclusive attention to him.

IN HIS two-volume study, *A History of Mental Retardation*, R.C. Scheerenberger places the origins of Cornelia de Lange syndrome under the classification "Unknown Prenatal Influence." We will probably never know why Mark was born with his many, many problems, and in fact we decided early on that it was pointless to agonize over this question. In any event, once confronted with the formidable responsibilities of his care, we had little time to speculate whether the few glasses of wine Margaret drank during pregnancy or the incompetence of a thoroughly unpleasant delivery nurse might have contributed to Mark's condition. Soon enough, life came to revolve around him and his requirements: his schooling, his therapies, his communication, his medical difficulties.

This is how it is for all parents of severely handicapped children. Margaret and I count ourselves fortunate that Mark at least does not suffer from a condition, like autism, which triggers exotic behaviors and an inability to relate to other people, or even to acknowledge the affection of family members. On the contrary, he is gregarious and likable, a much beloved figure in our Manhattan neighborhood—the mayor of the Upper West Side, he has been called.

When Mark was younger, and his abnormalities less physically obvious, little children often responded to him with benign curiosity, treating him as a mute but

friendly giant. Now, however, as a teenager, he often draws a different reaction on our trips to the local playground. Young children eye him with wariness and fear; one little girl, after Mark had plaintively invited her to join him in a game of catch, kept repeating, "Scary boy, scary boy." Her mother was embarrassed—ours is a very liberal neighborhood—but who could blame the child?

Increasingly, therefore, Mark's social life takes place in the world of adults, where, thankfully, he seldom meets rejection, and where the family routine is centered on his enjoyment. Our most deeply troubling thoughts stem from the knowledge that, for Mark, the golden years are right now, when he can count on us to make life interesting and fun. It is said that a serious problem for many retarded adults is a depression spawned of isolation; and indeed Mark, who has grown dependent on the active engagement of adults, tends to lapse into a passive funk when ignored. The one thing we cannot do for him is guarantee his future after he leaves the protection of his family; what lies ahead is something we find too painful to dwell on.

THERE IS some consolation to be had in America's impressive record of care for the retarded, and for the handicapped generally. We tend to forget that other societies do not necessarily share our sense of obligation and humanity toward those who lead a life, in the words of two pre-Nazi German advocates of euthanasia, "without value for itself or society."

The retarded have met especially cruel fates under totalitarian rule. Hitler is said to have murdered 100,000 handicapped Germans as part of a campaign to rid the country of the genetically impure, a project coordinated by an organization euphemistically named the Committee on Research on Hereditary and Constitutional Severe Diseases. In recent years, China has made the retarded the target of a program in some respects more insidious than the Nazi policy of "mercy killing." According to a Human Rights Watch report, the Chinese government has introduced a series of measures designed, in the regime's detoxifying phrase, "to raise the quality of the population." Basically, these measures amount to state coercion based on the principles of "superior births science," the Chinese name for eugenics.

China has been testing out its new policies at the provincial level as a prelude to the adoption of a national program. Thus the Gansu province implemented a law entitled "Regulations Prohibiting Idiots, Imbeciles, and Morons from Having Children." Under this law, retarded couples who plan to marry must be sterilized, and retarded women who become pregnant must undergo abortion. A more draconian law adopted by the Liaoning province applies restrictions to a much wider group, including the mentally ill and those with epilepsy and hemophilia. In addition, women who have already given birth to a "severely defective child," or have "too much or too little amniotic fluid," can be forced to have an abortion at the discretion of a doctor. The law also establishes a bureaucracy, comprised of "eugenics health-care supervisors," who are responsible for "supervising and inspecting the work of preventing inferior births."

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American achievements are worthy of praise not simply when measured against such extreme antihuman policies as these, but by any reasonable historical standard. Those who castigate America as the epitome of an obsessively acquisitive, winner-take-all society have obviously not bothered to examine the extraordinary—and costly—measures we have adopted over the last half-century for the protection, education, and medical care of our most vulnerable citizens. Perhaps surprisingly, the most unambiguous success story has to do with the institutionalization and then the deinstitutionalization of the mentally retarded.

Prior to the development of institutionalization, those suffering from retardation, epilepsy, or associated conditions were, if not kept at home with their families, then shut away in almshouses or left to roam the streets. Against that background, the push to create residential centers for the retarded, typically in remote rural settings, was seen, rightly, as a progressive step. Instead of facing a life of probable neglect, the retarded would be cared for, fed, given medical attention, and, where feasible, educated and trained for work. At the same time, society would be protected against what were widely thought to be the innate inclinations of the retarded toward criminality and/or sexual promiscuity. Thus, in addition to its educational and humanitarian functions, the institution was meant to segregate a community of potential robbers, rapists, and prostitutes.

It was, indeed, precisely because the retarded were looked on as major contributors to the breakdown of moral and social order that they became the targets of America's own eugenics movement. During the '20s and '30s, the "science" of eugenics had attained a measure of prominence in this country, and the roster of its advocates included many respected social reformers. Eugenics theory identified a correlation between high rates of immigration and what was seen as an upsurge of defective births, and it is likely that alarm over these "findings" played a role in the severe restrictions placed on immigration during the 1920s. Another pillar of the eugenics program, forced sterilization of the retarded and certain groups of physically handicapped adults, also made its mark on American social policy in that period. Eventually, both popular and expert opin-

ion turned against sterilization, and in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust, eugenically based theories died out almost completely.

UNTIL THE 1960s, the institution system served as America's answer to the challenge of the mentally retarded. While the quality of care varied considerably from one facility to another, the system as a whole marked a vast improvement over previous practice.

During the '60s, however, experts began to question both the efficiency and the humanity of shutting the retarded away for what often amounted to their entire lives. Adding to the alarm was the exposure of indecent conditions at various state-run facilities, the most notorious case in New York being the Willowbrook State School in Staten Island. Soon, tentative questions burgeoned into a politicized movement, one which demanded that residents of large institutions be transferred to small-scale residential settings in local communities and that, where feasible, large institutions be closed.

Critical to the success of this initiative was the political environment of the period. The aftermath of the civil-rights movement saw an explosion of particularist agendas and of demands for group rights and protections. At the same time, social scientists were developing theories which equated large institutions with penitentiaries. The courts played an important role in the process, mandating costly corrections in state institutions of all kinds, and forbidding placements in facilities where conditions were judged to be substandard.

We have now had over a quarter-century to assess the results of deinstitutionalization. In the case of the mentally ill, it has brought us the permanent army of the homeless deranged who haunt America's urban landscape. But in the case of the retarded, the experiment would seem to have been a notable success—indeed, a major achievement of liberal reform.

I strongly suspect that the smooth transition to deinstitutionalization of the retarded is due mainly to their manifest harmlessness—and also to their manifest vulnerability. Where the mentally ill have often been set adrift without a guarantee of a residence or social services, the retarded are never returned to a local community without a place to live—often near the homes of parents or other relatives—and the necessary adult supervision. It has also proved easier to persuade communities to accept group homes for the retarded than similar facilities for the mentally ill. To be sure, when done properly, deinstitutionalization can be expensive; the early promises of millions in savings—which made the move appealing to elected officials—have rarely materialized. But on the whole, deinstitutionalization has evolved from a risky experiment into an accepted and noncontroversial policy which enjoys wide support from politicians, families of the retarded, and professionals in the field.

IN CONTRAST to the success of deinstitutionalization, another major government initiative for the retarded—"special education"—has become a source of controversy and criticism. Until the mid-'70s, the education of retarded and other handicapped children was left to the discretion of the states, where it varied sub-

For Mark, inclusion in a big-city high school would be an exercise in terror.

stantially in quantity and quality. But in 1975 Congress passed legislation mandating that the public schools provide a suitable education for all children, no matter how severe their handicap, or else pay for the child's education in a private school.

Although the purpose was to see to the needs of a core group—the mentally retarded plus children with real physical disabilities or emotional troubles—the ensuing years have witnessed a huge increase in students diagnosed as “learning disabled” and referred to special-education programs. Under any circumstances, special education is an expensive proposition—class sizes are small and students have access to a variety of therapists, aides, and counselors—and the program has come to consume a constantly increasing percentage of the public-school budget. Thanks to the ever-expanding definition of “learning disabled” (fully 17 percent of students in Massachusetts have been so diagnosed) and the well-established practice of assigning “problem” students to special-education classes, enrollment shows no sign of stabilizing, much less declining.

In the meantime, another and potentially more serious threat has materialized from the opposite direction, in the form of what is known as the inclusion doctrine. According to this doctrine, children are *poorly* served by separate classes. Supporters of inclusion are pressing for changes which would ultimately lead to the replacement of special education by a system in which the handicapped would be integrated into normal school settings.

The idea of inclusion is not without merit. Some children may indeed be able to participate in the competitive environment of a normal classroom; this is particularly the case with children who suffer from certain physical disabilities, and young children who are only mildly retarded. But for those who advocate “full inclusion,” such commonsense measures are not enough. For them, the very concept of retardation is “socially constructed”: any perceived differences between those whom society designates retarded and those whom it designates normal are just that—matters of perception. On the basis of such reasoning, some theorists of inclusion characterize special education as the moral equivalent of apartheid, or have likened it to slavery. It follows that the remedy is to include the handicapped in the entire range of school activities.

IF THERE is one thing we have learned over the past quarter-century, it is that no idea which travels under the banner of the rights and dignity of the individual, especially the individual who carries the victim label, is too radical, unworkable, or unwise to be given respectful consideration by people who should know better. Thus it is with inclusion. Just as multiculturalism insinuated itself into the policy of elite universities with hardly a murmur of public discussion, inclusion is spreading from one school system to the next, pushed along by a small but vocal group of parent advocates, a few social scientists, a scattering of court decisions, school officials eager to adopt it as an instrument for budget control, and, finally, the Clinton administration's Department of Education.

The administration has, in fact, elevated inclusion to

something of a moral crusade. Tom Hehir, director of special education for the Department of Education, views disabled people, including the retarded, as a “distinct minority who have been historically subject to discrimination and have now gained full civil rights.” The controversy over inclusion, Hehir adds, “is about the idea of it, not the practice of it. Where inclusion has been done well, you don't find teachers or parents adamantly against it.”

I find these words chilling. How often have we heard that some policy has failed, or some program has fallen short, only because funding is insufficient, or implementation has been poor, or administrative procedures are flawed—in short, that everything is to blame but the concept itself? “We don't debate rights in this country,” says Hehir. Unfortunately, in this he is correct. Once a social program has been defined as a right, it is extremely difficult to conduct a rational discussion on its merits, particularly when its beneficiaries constitute a class of victims.

And yet bad policies, perpetuated because presumed rights are involved, have over and over again done serious damage to the very institutions that are crucial to the welfare of the group supposedly being benefited. Next to the family, probably no institution has suffered more in this respect than the public schools, and there is every reason to expect that full inclusion of students with significant disabilities will inflict still further harm. Our schools are already charged with promoting racial understanding, combating sexual harassment, educating students about AIDS, discouraging drug and alcohol use, and enhancing self-esteem (in addition to preventing simple violence). These days they are also, properly, facing growing demands to toughen standards, abolish “social” promotions, institute compulsory study of laboratory science and foreign languages, and train students for the global high-technology economy of the future.

With pressures like these, one might expect school boards and administrators to rank among the most vocal critics of radical inclusion formulas. In fact, however, they have been surprisingly supportive of the idea. Some school boards have capitulated to demands for inclusion out of nervousness over threatened litigation. Others have cynically embraced the idea as a cost-saving mechanism (it would do away with separate classes for the disabled). Still others are held in thrall by ideology. A report by the National Association of State Boards of Education endorses inclusion on the sweeping grounds of educational reform, civil rights, and equity. Amazingly, the report ignores the critical question of how the fully inclusive school is to cope

with autistic children, or children who exhibit strange and inappropriate behavior, who become violent when frustrated, who are chronically disruptive, or who require exceptional medical attention. No wonder middle-class parents are beginning to cite the ever growing emphasis on "special needs" as among the reasons for transferring their own children from public to private schools.

FOR US, as Mark's parents, inclusion involves much more than an abstract argument over educational policy. Were New York to take this path, Mark would, according to the logic of inclusion, be transferred from his present school, which is devoted solely to special-education classes, and placed in a regular classroom in our neighborhood high school, a forbidding building with a rough and intimidating student body. Because of his precarious sense of balance and lack of coordination, Mark is physically quite fearful; he goes into a panic if accosted by overly playful small dogs. For him, inclusion in a big-city high school would be an exercise in terror.

Mark would also present his new teachers and classmates with a set of unique problems. He demands constant supervision; he is easily distracted, and requires quite a bit of prodding, vocal encouragement, and physical assistance. Much of his education consists of lessons in "life skills," including dressing and even using the toilet. Although never violent or aggressively recalcitrant, he does have his own special strategies of resistance. Persuading him to do such elementary tasks as cleaning a table or loading a washing machine takes immense patience and a willingness to repeat the activity, again and again and again, until he finally accepts the routine.

The advocates of full inclusion speak glibly of giving teachers the training necessary to cope with the immense variety of challenges which handicapped children bring to the classroom. Yet no amount of training could prepare a regular teacher for Mark. In our experience, the requisite expertise and commitment are found only among teachers who have chosen to specialize in the handicapped.

Through Mark, our family has experienced, up close and personal, the vagaries of American social policy during a period of bitter division over practically every question of domestic life. Can we say, on the basis of our experience, that these social policies work? Yes and no. Deinstitutionalization of the retarded—again, not of the mentally ill—ranks as one of the more impressive examples of social reform. Special education, although subject to very serious abuse and overdue for reform, is by no means the unmitigated disaster its critics charge. But the drive to ditch this flawed program in favor of a radical alternative will almost certainly result in just such a disaster.

All in all, America's treatment of the retarded in recent decades offers an object lesson in the promotion of that much-sought-after social good, family values. One can only hope that, in this instance at least, we will not repeat the pattern—so glaringly obvious in the welfare mess and elsewhere—of sabotaging our genuine achievements in the pursuit of worthy-sounding but deeply wrongheaded ideas. □

SELF-ESTEEM AND EXCELLENCE

(Continued from page 13)

and grow; their intellectual skills and abilities will atrophy, or fail to develop in the first place.

TEACHERS WHO are rethinking their own experiences in contemporary classrooms are left, then, with a series of professional judgment calls to ponder. First, what kind of a school do I teach in? Is the Self-Esteem-Now theory as fully implemented in my school as it is in the Shopping Mall High School? Is it as fully implemented but in a different way? Or do I teach in a different kind of a school altogether?

Second, which theory best describes the students who have passed through my classrooms? Were low self-esteem and excessive modesty really a common problem? Or were inflated egos more prevalent? How did students of each type fare intellectually? Did the more modest and self-critical ones always learn less than those whose self-esteem was at peak levels? Or did the ones with the highest self-esteem often seem to exhibit a childish arrogance and impatience that actually stunted their intellectual growth and development?

Thoughtful teachers will want to start with their own experience, but they will not want to stop there. They will also want to take a look at what has happened to American education as a whole over the last few decades, and then reassess both theories in light of it. The Excellence Commission Report can help here. It provides a generally accurate summary of one-half of the story—the intellectual half. It tells us that on norm-referenced tests—the kinds of tests that make it possible to compare students from different decades and countries—American students fared very badly in the 1960s and 1970s. Few achieved excellence. Many did not even achieve competence.

It tells us, too, that this sad situation was a new one. In the 1950s, before the Self-Esteem-Now theory was widely implemented in American schools, competence was widespread, and excellence was common enough to make American students equal to those of any nation. In the 1970s, that was no longer so. Only our youngest students—those in grades K through 4—were still doing well. All of our other students were learning less, much less. That is an important half of the story, but it is only half.

The other half of the story has to do with self-esteem and happiness, and it, too, is important, but you will not find it in the Excellence Commission Report, or in any of the other recent education reports that I know of. Much of the evidence is in, though; collected and presented in a variety of ways by a wide array of scholars, using very different approaches and techniques, but arriving at very similar conclusions. Look, for example, at the clinical literature, and at the literature on psychopathology in particular. Narcissism is to the 1960s and the 1970s what neuroticism was to earlier decades. Historians as diverse as Oscar Handlin and Christopher Lasch see it as a major contemporary social problem, too. Excessive self-esteem, it seems, can cause as much trouble as inadequate self-esteem, for individuals and for whole societies, too. ▶

Low self-esteem is not as common in childhood as the self-esteem theorists assume it is, either, and it is no more common among black children than it is among white ones. These findings came as a great surprise to many of the self-esteem researchers who found them, staring back at them from their data, but the findings were no flukes: They turned up again and again, in study after study. Public opinion poll data suggest the same thing, indicating, as they do, that the self-esteem of young Americans of all races and classes was generally high and rising—sometimes to dizzying new heights—throughout most of the last two decades.

FOR AMERICAN education as a whole, then, it seems fair to conclude that while the Self-Esteem-Now theory of educational development failed to produce excellence and may even have retarded its development, it did succeed in raising the self-esteem of American students to a marked degree. What we are left with, it seems, is a choice, a forced choice. We cannot really maximize intellectual development and self-esteem of the feel-good-now type at the same time. We must choose between them, giving one priority over the other.

For some teachers, and some parents, too, the choice will seem easy. They would prefer to have both simultaneously but, if forced to choose, they will opt for self-esteem on the grounds that students are whole human beings, not disembodied intellects, and their happiness is more important than their test scores. Alas, the choice is not as simple and straightforward as it looks, because we are confronted with a paradox as well as a choice.

The paradox is that by focusing only on children's happiness, we may end up with heart-breakingly high numbers of unhappy children. That, at any rate, is what happened in America in the 1960s and the 1970s. The evidence is in on that score, too, and it all points in the same paradoxical direction. High self-esteem notwithstanding, those were not happy decades for American youth. They were decades of trouble and tragedy.

Look, for example, at statistics on drug and alcohol abuse among young Americans. Addiction rates soared in the 1960s and the 1970s with tragic consequences for hundreds of thousands of young lives. Look, too, at teenage crime and venereal disease and suicide rates. They climbed, steeply, during those decades. And look, especially, at the number of out-of-wedlock births to teenaged girls. Those rates skyrocketed, and have not leveled off yet. Looking at all these statistics, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that high self-esteem of the feel-good-now type works no better as a guarantor of happiness than it does as a master key to intellectual development.

These statistics have been pulled together from multiple sources and meticulously reassembled in a single, slim volume that teachers who want to go beyond the Excellence Report will find useful. Its title is *Losing Ground*, its author is Charles Murray, and it was published by Basic Books in 1984. The statistics in it prove that the paradox exists, but they do not explain why.

The old theories of child development do. They tell

us that despite all the momentary pleasures it provides, an exclusive focus on feel-good-now self-esteem, at home and at school, will not produce happiness. It will produce restlessness and dissatisfaction, a constant hunger to get more for less, and a life organized in search of it. In such a life, relationships with others will tend to be superficial and unstable, and the lure of drugs, alcohol, irresponsible sexuality, and crime will be powerful, and hard to resist. They promise the satisfactions that self-esteem seekers are looking for, and they promise them *now*. Instant pleasure. Instant relief. Instant success. They feel good now, the old theories tell us, but they will produce unhappiness as well as incompetence.

That could well be what happened to us in the 1960s and the 1970s. American parents, like American teachers, went to great lengths to ensure the happiness of American children in those decades, nurturing their self-esteem and protecting it from injury, discarding standards and discipline, at home and at school. They did it because establishment experts in schools of education and psychology convinced them that feel-good-now self-esteem was the master key that unlocked both doors, the one to intellectual development and the one to happiness, too. In truth, it seems to have unlocked neither, but many American parents and teachers are still its captives.

THERE WAS one great rebellion, though, in the late 1970s. It was called the minimum competence testing movement, and it gives us the best evidence we have about what parents and teachers can accomplish when they join together to insist that a standard must be met. The standard they chose was literacy, and they proved they were serious about it, in most states, by decreeing that no student could graduate from high school without passing a test designed to measure it.

Experts in the Self-Esteem-Now establishment were appalled. They were sure that the movement would damage students' self-esteem without helping them to learn, and that it would have especially devastating effects on black students. At first, it looked as if they might be right. In Florida, 80 percent to 90 percent of the black students who took that state's minimum competence test failed it on their first try, and a federal judge declared the whole program unconstitutional, issuing an injunction against it in 1979.

In 1983, he lifted it, permanently, and no wonder. The program's results were spectacular. The students who failed the test on their first try may have suffered a blow to their self-esteem, but they were not crushed, and they did not quit. They kept trying, bouncing back after each failure, and redoubling their efforts. By the fifth try, more than 90 percent of them passed the test, and got their diplomas, along with a healthy dose of *earned* self-esteem.

Could the same thing happen again if parents and teachers throw off the yoke of the Self-Esteem-Now theory, once more embracing excellence in the 1980s as they embraced competence in the late 1970s? All the evidence we have indicates that it could, and that it would be a great decade for American education if they did. □

SHOULD SCHOOLS BOOST SELF-ESTEEM?

(Continued from page 19)

asked about ability to get along with others, no students at all said they were below average.¹³

Responses to scales designed to measure self-esteem show the same pattern. There are always plenty of scores at the high end and plenty in the middle, but only a few straggle down toward the low end. This seems to be true no matter which of the many self-esteem scales is used. Moreover, the few individuals who do show the truly low self-esteem scores probably suffer from multiple problems that need professional therapy. Self-esteem boosting from schools would not cure them.

Obviously there's precious little evidence of low self-esteem in such numbers. By definition, plenty of people are in reality below average, but most of them refuse to acknowledge it. Meanwhile large numbers of people clearly overestimate themselves. The top 1 percent can really only contain 1 percent, not the 25 percent who claim to belong there. Meanwhile, the problem that would justify programs aimed at boosting self-esteem—people who significantly underestimate themselves—is extremely rare.

Conclusion

What is to be done? In response to the question about whether schools should boost self-esteem, my answer is: Don't bother. Efforts at boosting self-esteem probably feel good both for students and for teachers, but the real benefits and positive consequences are likely to be minor. Meanwhile, inflated self-esteem carries an assortment of risks and dangers, and so efforts to boost self-esteem may do as much harm as good, or possibly even more. The time, effort, and resources that schools put into self-esteem will not be justified by any palpable improvements in school performance, citizenship, or other outcomes.

There is one psychological trait that schools could help instill and that is likely to pay off much better than self-esteem. That trait is self-control (including self-discipline). Unlike self-esteem, self-control (or lack thereof) is directly and causally involved in a large set of social and personal problems.¹⁴ Addiction, crime, violence, unwanted pregnancy, venereal disease, poor school performance, and many other problems have self-control failure as a core cause. Also unlike self-esteem, self-control brings benefits to both the individual and society. People with better self-control are more successful (socially and academically), happier, and better adjusted, than others. They also make better parents, spouses, colleagues, and employees. In other words, their self-control benefits the people close to them.

Indeed, I am convinced that weak self-control is a crucial link between family breakdown and many social problems. Study after study has shown that children of single parents show up worse than average on almost every measure, ranging from math achievement tests to criminal convictions. Most single parents I know are loving, dedicated, hard-working individuals, but all their energy goes toward providing food and shelter and their children's other basic needs. It seems

to take a second parent to provide the supervision and consistent rule enforcement that foster self-control in the child.

How much the schools can do to build self-control is unclear. Still, just recognizing the priority and value of self-control will help. Obviously, self-control is not something that is instilled directly (as in a "self-control class") but rather should be cultivated like a cluster of good habits in connection with regular academic work, especially in the context of clear, consistent enforcement of academic and behavioral standards. The disciplinary and academic culture of a school should be aimed at recognizing and encouraging the self-control of individual students, including rewarding good self-control and punishing its failures or absences. With each new plan, policy, or procedure, school officials might pause to ask "Will this help strengthen self-control?" instead of "Might this hurt anybody's self-esteem?"

In the long run, self-control will do far more for the individuals and for society as a whole than will self-esteem. Moreover, self-control gives people the ability to change and improve themselves, and so it can bring about changes in substantive reality, not just in perception. And if one can make oneself into a better person, self-esteem is likely to increase too. Raising self-control may thus end up boosting self-esteem—but not in the dangerous or superficial ways that flourish now.

My final message to all the people working in today's schools and seeking to help the next generation get a good start is, therefore, as follows: Forget about self-esteem, and concentrate on self-control. □

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- ¹³ These findings are covered in Gilovich's book. A rare exception to this general inflation is that American females are dissatisfied with their bodies and in particular think they are overweight.
- ¹⁴ For review, see Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice (1994), *Losing Control*.

ETHNICITY AND ACHIEVEMENT

(Continued from page 35)

cents, during this same time period, the suicide rate has more than *quadrupled*. Japanese adolescents may feel more pressure on them to do well in school than American adolescents, but this does not appear to have resulted in an increase in suicide.

The difference in mental health between Japanese and American adolescents, favoring Japanese youngsters, is also seen when less serious indicators of psychological disturbance than suicide are examined. A recent report from the University of Michigan cross-cultural study of achievement indicates, for example, that minor signs of psychological distress are also more common among American than among Japanese students. The researchers surveyed over 1,000 students in each country and collected measures of stress, depression, anxiety, aggression, and some somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, fatigue, sleep difficulties, gastrointestinal problems). Contrary to widespread belief, the American students reported *more* stress, *more* depression, *more* anxiety, *more* aggression, and *more* somatic complaints than did their Japanese counterparts.

Stereotypes to the contrary, it is simply not the case that Japanese students are made miserable by the more intense academic environment in which they grow up. Yet this same argument—that high achievement necessarily comes at a cost to one's mental health—has also surfaced in discussions about the achievement gap between Asian students and other students *within* the United States. The argument is familiar: Asian-American students may be achieving more, but they are paying a price with their mental health. Is there any truth to this assertion?

Because we collected extensive data on youngsters' mental health, we were able to compare Asian-American students with their peers on some of the same indices used by the Michigan researchers in their comparisons of American and Japanese students. Compared with their White counterparts, the Asian-American students in our sample reported significantly *less* psychological distress (depression and anxiety), *less* somatic distress (headaches, sleep problems, etc.), *less* delinquency (aggression, troubles with the law), and *less* drug and alcohol use than other students. A different set of researchers, studying junior high school students, reached the same conclusion: "Contrary to the common belief...Asian students' academic success [is] NOT at the expense of their social adjustment."

When we look a bit closer at the correlates of positive adolescent mental health—within *any* ethnic group—it is not difficult to see why Asian students report fewer psychological problems, "despite" their superior academic performance: in all ethnic groups, students who do well in school report better mental health and fewer behavioral problems than students who do poorly in school. In fact, academic success is one of the strongest predictors of psychological adjustment in childhood and adolescence.

This is not, as many individuals believe, because positive mental health facilitates academic success. This, interestingly, was the erroneous assumption be-

hind the movement in some educational circles to raise youngsters' self-esteem—that is, it was wrongly believed that enhancing the way students feel about themselves would lead to improvements in their school performance. We now know that success in school leads to more positive self-esteem, not the other way around. Artificially inflating youngsters' feelings of competence does little to promote genuine achievement and probably impedes it, since it erodes youngsters' sense of standards. Paradoxically, if we are genuinely concerned about improving the mental health of American youth, we ought to take steps to see that they are genuinely challenged and achieve more in school.

The High Costs of Americanization

Only a portion of the Asian and Latino youngsters currently attending school in the United States have parents who were born in this country. Any study of ethnic differences within the contemporary United States must therefore take into account the variation that exists both between and within different ethnic groups into which individual students and their parents were born. Because we collected data on youngsters' immigration histories, we were able to do this.

Most of us expect that individuals would have an especially tough time when they first arrive in a new country, and that, as a consequence, children who are recent immigrants would exhibit more distress and difficulty than their counterparts whose families have been living in the new country for some time. Given the fact that few nonnatives arrive in the United States fluent in English or acclimated to American customs and habits, one would expect that school would present a particularly demanding set of challenges for recent immigrants and their children. We would hypothesize, therefore, that students born outside the United States would be doing worse in school than those who are native Americans, and that native Americans whose families have been in this country for several generations would be faring better than their counterparts who arrived more recently.

Surprisingly, just the opposite is true: the longer a student's family has lived in this country, the worse the youngster's school performance and mental health. Consider some of the following findings from our study. Foreign-born students—who, incidentally, report significantly more discrimination than American-born youngsters and significantly more difficulty with the English language—nevertheless earn higher grades in school than their American-born counterparts. Although some commentators have speculated that the reason for this is economic—that families who are able to immigrate to the United States are from a higher social class than ethnic minority families who have been living here for several generations, and thus, more likely to succeed in school—our findings don't support this interpretation. The differences in school performance favoring immigrants over native Americans remain just as large even after we take family background into account.

It is not simply that immigrants are outperforming nonimmigrants on measures of school achievement. On virtually every factor we know to be *correlated*

with school success, students who were not born in this country outscore those who were born here. And, when we look only at American-born students, we find that youngsters whose parents are foreign-born outscore those whose parents are native Americans.

The more Americanized students—those whose families have been living here longer—are less committed to doing well in school than their immigrant counterparts. Immigrants spend more time on homework, are more attentive in class, are more oriented to doing well in school, and are more likely to have friends who think academic achievement is important. Immigrants also are more likely to have the sort of healthy attributional style that is correlated with school success: in accounting for their scholastic successes and failures, they downplay the significance of luck, native ability, and other factors that are out of one's control; instead, immigrants see effort as the critical influence on achievement.

Differences between immigrants and nonimmigrants are also apparent when we look at various manifestations of mental health. Immigrant adolescents report less drug use, less delinquency, less misconduct in school, fewer psychosomatic problems, and less psychological distress than do American-born youngsters.

The adverse effects of Americanization are seen among Asian and Latino youngsters alike (that is, within each of the two largest populations of immigrant youth in this country), with achievement decreasing, and problems increasing, with each successive generation. Instead of finding what one might reasonably expect—that the longer a family has been in this country, the better their child will be faring in our schools—we find exactly the reverse. Our findings, as well as those from several other studies, suggest that becoming Americanized is detrimental to youngsters' achievement, and terrible for their overall mental health.

How can we account for this? One theory is that immigrant youngsters grow increasingly skeptical about the American system with each generation. Many Asian and Latino families arrive in the United States optimistic about their future and committed to the belief that the "land of opportunity" does in fact offer chances for economic and social advancement through schooling. Under these conditions, immigrant parents probably communicate to their children the need to work hard in school and instill in their youngsters a strong drive to achieve. Over time, however, youngsters discover that the actual opportunities are not as plentiful as they had been told, and that individuals of color often face prejudice and discrimination as they make their way through school and into the labor force. With each generation, therefore, ethnic minority youngsters become increasingly skeptical about the American dream and, consequently, increasingly disengaged from school.

An alternative explanation (although entirely consistent with the first) is that immigrant youngsters' values and attitudes about the relative importance of education are transformed as they become more and more Americanized. Since American adolescents do not typically value academic excellence, the more that immi-

grant youth acculturate to mainstream American values, the less they see school achievement as important. In other words, the declining achievement of immigrants with each successive generation is not the product of disenchantment in the face of limited opportunities, but a result of the *normative* socialization of ethnic minority youth into the mainstream's indifferent (or at least, ambivalent) stance toward school success. Because part of what it means to be an American teenager in contemporary society is adopting a cavalier attitude toward school, the process of Americanization leads toward more and more educational indifference.

Although we cannot settle this issue definitively with our data, it looks like the second explanation (the socialization of indifference) is more likely to be true than the first (the "dashed hopes" hypothesis). When we look at youngsters' beliefs about the importance of school success for their future occupational careers, we find no differences between recently arrived immigrants and first- or second-generation Americans. Nor do we find differences between these groups in their beliefs about the consequences of doing poorly in school. If the "dashed hopes" hypothesis were true, we ought to see it reflected in youngsters' answers to these questions about the importance of school (that is, recent immigrants should have more faith in the value of schooling than their native counterparts).

This is not the case, however. Instead, it looks as if the longer a family has lived here, the more its children resemble the "typical" American teenager, and part of this package of traits is, unfortunately, academic indifference, or even disengagement. Americanized ethnic minority youngsters—Asian and Latino alike—spend significantly more time hanging out with friends, more time partying, more time dating, more time on nonacademic extracurriculars, and more time with peers who value socializing over academics. In essence, the broader context of what it means to be an American teenager in the contemporary United States pulls students away from school and draws them toward more social and recreational pursuits.

Our findings on the costs of Americanization teach us a different, but equally important, lesson about genetic explanations of ethnic differences in achievement and school performance. If in fact the superior performance of Asian students, or the poor performance of Latino students, were entirely due to genetic factors, we would not expect to find that student performance and behavior in school varied within these ethnic groups as a function of students' or parents' country of birth. The fact that students who have been brought up in the United States achieve less, are less interested in school, are more likely to engage in problem behavior, and are more interested in socializing than their nonnative counterparts from the same ethnic group points to a very strong environmental influence on achievement. It also says something very disturbing about the process of Americanization.

The Importance of Peers

One clear reason for Asian students' success is that Asian students are far more likely than others to have

friends who place a great deal of emphasis on academic achievement. Asian-American students are, in general, significantly more likely to say that their friends believe it is important to do well in school, and significantly less likely than other students to say that their friends place a premium on having an active social life. Not surprisingly, Asian students are the most likely to say that they work hard in school to keep up with their friends.

Asian students' descriptions of their friends as hardworking and academically oriented are corroborated by information we gathered independently from the friends themselves. One of the unique features of our study was our ability to match information provided by adolescents with information provided directly by their friends. This provided us with a more accurate assessment of each adolescent's social network than would have been possible had we been forced to depend on adolescents' *perceptions* of their friends' behavior, since such perceptions can be erroneous (like adults, adolescents tend to overstate the degree of similarity that exists between their friends and themselves).

When we look at friends' activity patterns for adolescents from different ethnic groups, we see quite clearly that the friends with whom Asian students socialize place relatively greater emphasis on academics than other students do, whereas the opposite is true for Black and Hispanic teenagers. Specifically, Asian students' friends have higher performance standards (that is, they hold tougher standards for what grades are acceptable), spend more time on homework, are more committed to education, and earn considerably higher grades in school. Black and Hispanic students' friends earn lower grades, spend less time on their studies, and have substantially lower performance standards. White students' friends fall somewhere between these two extremes on these various indicators.

When I first saw these findings, my presumption was that they were due entirely to racial segregation in adolescent peer groups. In other words, if Asian students are performing better in school than other students, and Black and Hispanic students worse, and if peer groups are constituted mainly along ethnic lines, it necessarily follows that Asian students will have friends who are doing better in school, and Black and Hispanic students will have friends who are doing more poorly.

It turns out that the segregation argument is only partly true. While it is certainly the case that adolescent peer groups are characterized by a high degree of ethnic segregation—about 80 percent of White and Black students, and more than half of Asian and Hispanic students have best friends from the same ethnic group—there are sufficient numbers of cross-racial friendships in any school to ask whether the pattern described above holds for students who travel in integrated circles. The answer is that it

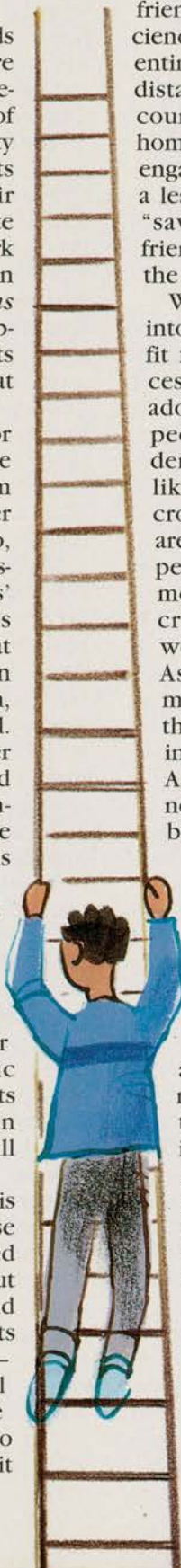
does, at least for the most part. Even if we look solely at youngsters whose best friends are from a different ethnic background, we still find that Asian students' friends place a greater emphasis on doing well in school, and Black and Hispanic students' friends, relatively less. Once again, White students fall somewhere in between.

Peer pressure among Asian students and their friends to do well in school is so strong that any deficiencies in the home environment—for example, parenting that is either too authoritarian or emotionally distant—are rendered almost unimportant. It is, of course, true that Asian students from authoritative homes perform better in school than those from disengaged ones. But an Asian student who comes from a less-than-optimal home environment is likely to be "saved" from academic failure by falling in with friends who value academic excellence and provide the necessary support for achievement.

Why is it so likely that an Asian student will fall into an academically oriented peer crowd and benefit from its influence? Ironically, Asian student success is at least partly a by-product of the fact that adolescents do not have equal access to different peer groups in American high schools. Asian students are "permitted" to join intellectual crowds, like the "brains," but the more socially oriented crowds—the "populars," "jocks," and "partyers"—are far less open to them. For example, whereas 37 percent of the White students in our sample were members of one of these three socially oriented crowds, only 14 percent of the Asian students were—even though more than 20 percent of the Asian students said they *wished* they could be members of these crowds (slightly less than one-third of the White students aspired to membership in one of these crowds). In essence, at least some Asian students who would like to be members of nonacademically oriented crowds are denied membership in them.

A similar argument has been advanced by several Asian social scientists in explaining the extraordinary success of Asian-American students. They have noted that academic success is one of the few routes to social mobility open to Asians in American culture—think for a moment of the relative absence of Asian-American entertainers, athletes, politicians, and so on. For Asian youngsters, who see most nonacademic pathways to success blocked off, they have "no choice" but to apply themselves in school. This is why Asian students are so much more likely than other youngsters to subscribe to the belief that academic failure will bring terrible consequences. When individuals believe that there are few opportunities to succeed through routes other than education, doing well in school becomes that much more important.

Because Asian students find it more difficult than White students to break into the more socially oriented crowds, they drift toward academically focused peer groups whose members value and encourage scholastic success. The re-



sult of this drift is that a large number of Asian students, even those who are less academically talented than their peers, end up in crowds that are highly oriented toward success in the classroom. Once in these crowds, Asian students benefit tremendously from the network of academically oriented peers. Indeed, one of the striking features of Asian student friendships is how frequently they turn to each other for academic assistance and consultation.

The opposite is true for Black and Latino students, who are far more likely than other students to find themselves in peer groups that actually devalue academic accomplishment. Indeed, peer pressure among Black and Latino students *not* to excel in school is so strong in many communities—even among middle-class adolescents—that many positive steps that Black and Latino parents have taken to facilitate their children's school success are undermined. In essence, much of the good work that Black and Latino parents are doing at home is being undone by countervailing pressures in their youngsters' peer groups. As a consequence, parental efforts in these ethnic groups do not have the payoff that we would expect.

This is true not only in racially integrated schools, but in segregated schools as well. In one well-known study of an all-black, inner-city high school, for example, the researchers found that students who tried to do well in school were teased and openly ostracized by their peers for "acting White." Students were criticized—accused of acting as if they were "better" than their peers—it they earned good grades, exerted effort in class, or attempted to please their teachers. Those who wished to do well academically were forced to hide their success and to develop other means of maintaining their popularity among classmates in order to compensate for being good students, such as clowning around in class or excelling in some athletic activity. Why would Black and Latino peer groups demean academic success? In many minority peer groups, scholastic success is equated with "selling out" one's cultural identity, as some sort of surrender to the control of White, middle-class America.

I found this so interesting that I asked an extremely bright African-American undergraduate in one of my seminars at Temple University, who was familiar with our research, to help me better understand this phenomenon. The student said that the finding rang true for her. She had been raised in dire poverty within inner-city Washington, D.C., and she was the only one of her school friends to have made it out of the ghetto; as she explained, all of her former schoolmates were either on drugs, in jail, on welfare, or raising an infant. She was torn about where she would settle after graduation from college; the pull to return to her home community was very strong, but she felt that she could not face her former friends. Whenever she returned home during school vacations, she was taunted for thinking too highly of herself and teased for not yet having given birth to a child. She said that the pressure her friends put on her over the years to drop out of college and return to her roots was enormous. In fact, she said, her friends intimated that the only reason she had gone off to college and avoided early pregnancy was because she was not physically attractive enough

to interest a man.

Why is succeeding in school equated in some circles with "acting White" or "selling out?" As Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, two African-American social scientists who have studied this phenomenon explain:

[W]hite Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, and ... black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability, began to define academic success as white people's prerogative, and began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating white people in academic striving, i.e., from "acting white."

One of my colleagues at the University of Georgia, Layli Phillips, points out that this message—that academic success is somehow incompatible with a healthy Black identity—is perpetuated by a mass media that emphasizes and glorifies low-income African-American peer culture, making it attractive even to middle-class African-American youngsters. African-American parents who want their children to succeed in school are not only battling the force of the Black peer culture (which in many circles demeans academic success), but are fighting a difficult battle against the very powerful images of anti-intellectual Black youth portrayed as normative in music, movies, and television.

We heard variations on the "acting White" theme many, many times over the course of our interviews with high schools students. The sad truth is that many students, and many Black students in particular, are forced to choose between doing well in school and having friends. Although there are crowds within each high school in which academic success is valued and in which successful students are respected, these crowds tend to be dominated by White students, and peer groups in American high schools are so ethnically segregated that it is extremely difficult for Black and Latino students to join these crowds. Thus, in many schools, there is a near-complete absence of identifiable peer groups that respect and encourage academic success and are genuinely open to Black and Latino students. As a consequence, it is far more difficult for a talented African-American student than it is for a comparably skilled Asian or White student to find the necessary peer support for achievement.

Among the high-achieving Black students in our sample, for example, only 2 percent said their friends were members of the "brain" crowd, as opposed to 8 percent of the White students and 10 percent of the Asian students with the same grades in school. Interestingly, the proportion of the high-achieving Black students who said they *wished* they were members of the "brain" crowd (6 percent) was about the same as it was for the White students (5 percent). Thus, while just as many Black students as White students aspire toward membership in the "brain" crowd, membership in this group is more open to White than to Black students.

It is important to understand that the pressure against academic excellence that is pervasive within



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Black and Latino peer groups is not unique to these ethnic groups. Rather, what we see in these peer groups is an extreme case of what exists within most White peer groups as well. As noted earlier, the prevailing norm in most adolescent peer groups is one of "getting by without showing off"—doing what it takes to avoid getting into trouble in school, but at the same time shunning academic excellence. The chief difference appears to be not in the different ethnic groups' avoidance of excellence—this is common among all but the Asian youngsters—but in how the different ethnic groups define academic "trouble."

We measured students' perception of this "trouble threshold" by asking them what the lowest grade was that they could receive without their parents getting angry. The students' answers to this question confirmed our suspicion: Among Black and Latino students, not until their grades dipped below a C- did these adolescents perceive that they would get into trouble. Among White students, however, the average "trouble threshold" was one entire letter grade higher—somewhere between a B and a C. And among Asian students, the average grade below which students expected their parents to become angry was an astounding A-! One reason for the relatively poorer school performance of Black and Latino students, then, is that these students typically have different definitions of "poor" grades, relative to their White and Asian counterparts. And because peer crowds tend to be ethnically segregated, different normative standards develop within Black and Latino peer groups than in other crowds. Conversely, one reason for the remarkable success of Asian students is that they have a much stricter, less forgiving definition of academic failure than their Black, White, and Latino peers, and this definition shapes peer norms.

Our findings suggest, then, that ... at a time in development when children are especially susceptible to the power of peer influence, the circle of friends an adolescent can choose from may make all the difference between excellent and mediocre school performance. □

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