

# 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-

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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.

**I**S 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.

**B**INET'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



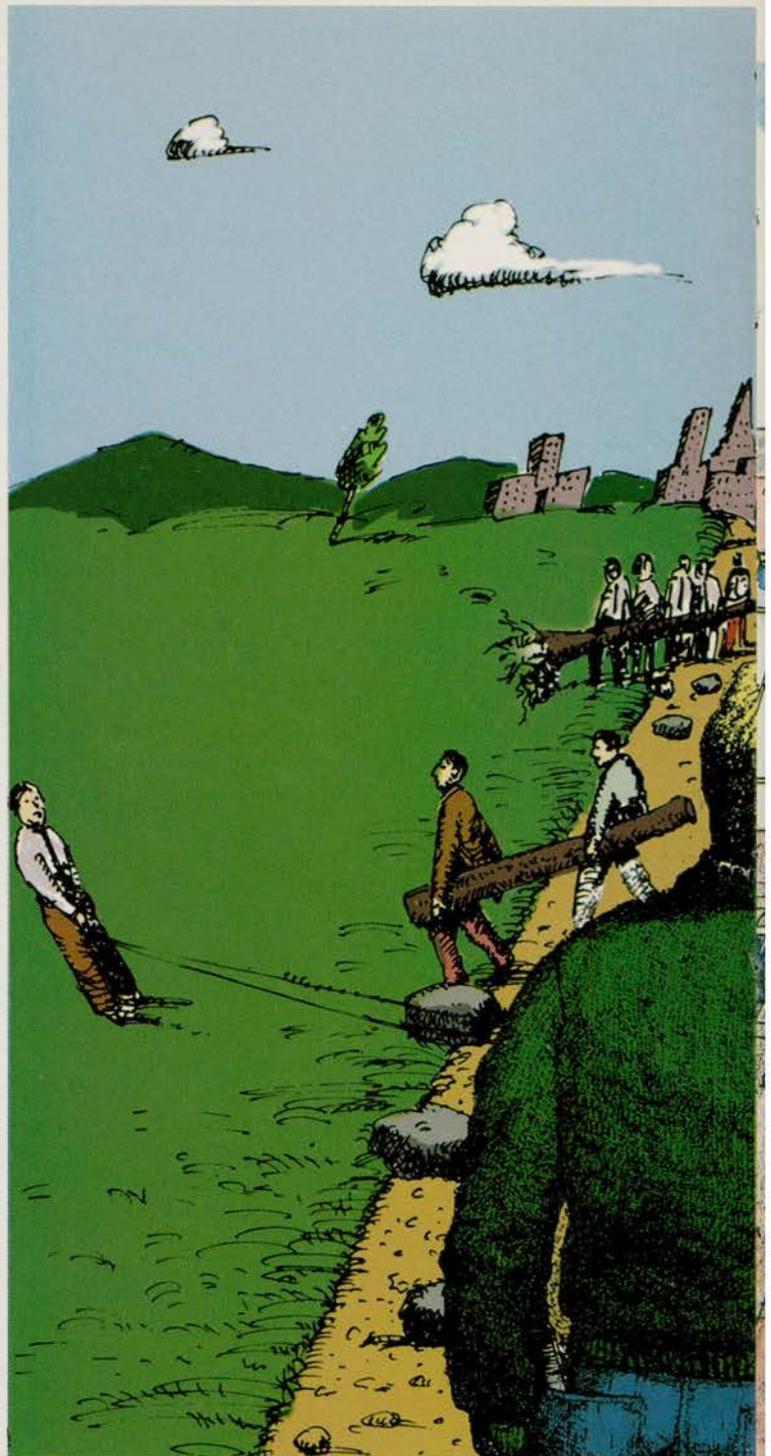
self-esteem of the infantile variety that Freud called narcissism, and I call *feel-good-now* self-esteem, either. Often, the immediate effect is deflating, particularly to highly inflated narcissistic egos, but the ultimate results—caring relationships with others, the development of competence, and 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.

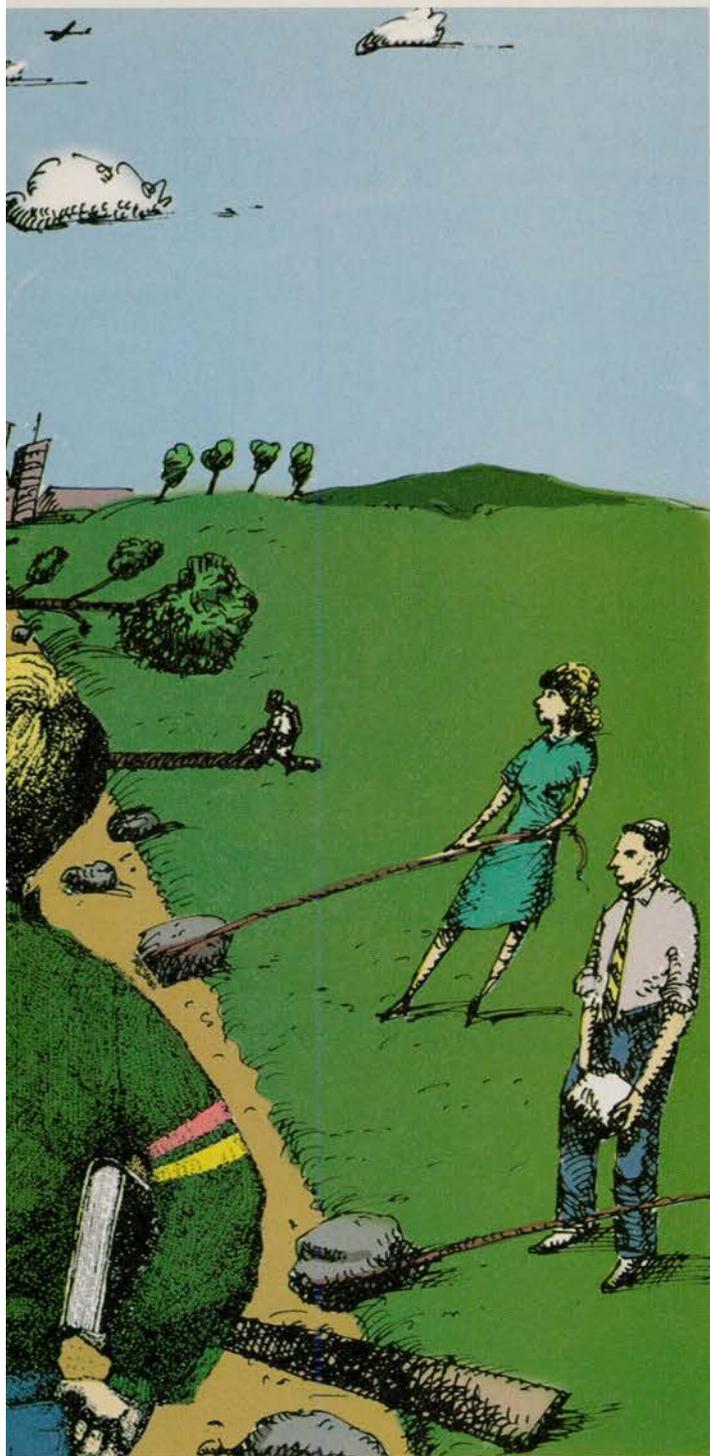
**WHICH THEORY** is closest to the truth? Which one will best help today's teachers in their struggle to develop excellence in their students, this year, and in the years ahead? As we noted at the outset, one good way for teachers to re-examine these questions is to go back over their own past experiences—with 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

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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.’”