LET’S STRIKE OUT: SELF-ESTEEM RHETORIC IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the dangers of mix/overusing self-esteem rhetoric in the education of children with handicapping conditions. The author criticizes current self-esteem approaches as hoaxes which exacerbate rampant learning failures in special and regular education programs. The true roles and responsibilities of special educators are scrutinized. The fundamental importance of reality-based special education in the lives of children with disabilities is discussed.

Impelled by the mass adoption of self-esteem rhetoric among regular education professionals, self-esteem enhancement programs have become a pedagogical fashion in today’s American schools. The proponents of the self-esteem movement argue that if the responses of others make a child feel good about him/herself, the child will be motivated, convinced of his/her ability to learn, and launched on a path to a successful life (Hwang, 1995). The theory is simple: enhanced self-concept will result in improved learning, and low self-esteem will cause learning failures (Beane, 1991; Black, 1991; Kohn, 1994). Low and high self-esteem have been recognized as either the culprit or the panacea for all types of learning problems (Rosemond, 1994). Consequently, schools saturate children with self-congratulatory words in an attempt to boost student self-esteem (Mitchell, 1986).

However, recently an increasing number of researchers have begun to criticize the current self-esteem enhancement programs as a misguided hoax that merely exacerbates rampant learning failures among American school children (e.g., Marshall, 1995; McMillan, Singh, & Simonetta, 1995; Sarler, 1992). As Rist (1992) observed, self-esteem adherents promote children’s self-concept by either leading them to believe they are special and wonderful or having youngsters recite such self-congratulatory statements regardless of their level of accomplishment. Further, to keep children feeling good about themselves and to ensure student success, educators are being pressured to avoid all criticism and to lower academic standards (Damon, 1995; Krauthhammer, 1990).

Typical self-esteem programs revolve around children focusing on themselves and what they like or feeling good about themselves, without teaching them what they can do or how to earn such feelings. Katz (1993), denouncing the popular self-esteem rhetoric, pointed out
that current self-esteem approaches send completely counterproductive messages to children by directing youngsters’ attention toward their own basest inner gratification. Self-esteem rhetoric encourages a self-absorption bordering on narcissism: “I’m special, I’m important, here’s how I feel about things” (Kohn, 1994, p. 277).

Emphasizing self-esteem and self-congratulation may stem from a desire to correct previous generations’ traditions of avoiding compliments for fear of making children conceited. However, current practices are dangerous over-corrections which produce precisely what needs to be avoided (Katz, 1993). Mis/overused self-image rhetoric leads to false self-esteem, the essence of which is egocentric self-indulgence—a breeding ground for narcissistic self-intoxication and eventual learning failures. “After all, if people are perfect and lovable just the way they are, why should anyone need to change and strive” (Leo, 1990, p. 16)?

Self-esteem rhetoric has far-reaching implications for special education practices. Despite enormous resources being spent, a great number of graduates of special education programs are not able to acquire and sustain meaningful employment opportunities in their post secondary environment (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1994; Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 1996; Henley, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 1996; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 1992). The most common cause of job failures among individuals, with or without handicapping conditions, is not so much low self-esteem (Stevenson, 1992) as inadequate job skills, including social interaction skills and work ethic (Mercer & Mercer, 1993; Schloss & Smith, 1994; Siegel & Gaylord-Ross, 1991).

However, special educators, as Weiner (1995) attested, still strive to promote student self-esteem, having been indoctrinated that no child in special education should ever fail and that the educator’s sole responsibility is to keep the student happy and in school. The tragic result of this seemingly humane special education practice is production of coddled children with disabilities who are taught to indulge and gratify themselves throughout their life span. Children with disabilities are being relentlessly conditioned to feel good about themselves, their lives, and so forth regardless of objective realities; many children with special needs do not ever see any reason to improve themselves.

False self-esteem leads to a satisfaction with mediocrity among many children with special needs. While, positive self-regard may provide the confidence necessary to take on a new task or skill, self-regard derived solely from outside validation will not (Hitz & Driscoll, 1994). In fact, an inflated self-image caused by unearned praise may lead children with disabilities to believe that anything better than great is unnecessary and requires too much work.

Further, Black (1991) warned that the indiscriminate use of positive self-esteem comments to special education students who demonstrate socially unacceptable behaviors may send the children and their peers the wrong message, resulting in inadvertent reinforcement of improper behaviors. The message is that inappropriate behaviors are just part of what they are and that is just fine. Hence, children are being praised for everything, including the very personal shortcomings which have caused their own learning failures (Hwang, 1995). Gas-kin-Butler and Tucker’s study (1995) revealed that maladaptive behaviors may also be a source of high self-esteem; an individual’s self-concept may actually be enhanced when his/her peers and significant others seem to approve of their inappropriate behaviors.

The exceptional child certainly deserves respect by the virtue of his/her quality of being a human being endowed with inalienable rights. However, special educators should not condone, under the rhetoric of self-esteem, children’s inappropriate behaviors. It is what exceptional children do, not who they are, that makes them fail to learn (Charles, 1996). Everyone has certain attributes from which self-esteem can be derived. It is these strengths that should be targeted and praised by teachers. However, not all strengths are considered valuable by society and thus, they cannot be bases for self-esteem (Dewhurst, 1991).

As Stevenson (1992) implied, the core of a false self-esteem strategy is cheating, at best. Are special educators obliged to tell students and parents the truth? If the teacher’s duty
is to present accurate information not only on curriculum content, but also on a student’s classroom performance and behaviors, should the special educator tell the truth to a student with a disability who appears to think too much of him/herself based on the self-esteem derived from a source that the society deems unworthy (Dewhurst, 1991)?

The author has never encountered, as a classroom teacher and a special education teacher educator, students either with or without disabilities who improved their classroom demeanor and skill acquisition by being given unconditional praise. When appropriate, children’s shortcomings need to be sincerely criticized and corrected rather than praised (Taffel, 1994).

By doing so, special educators can help youngsters improve their behaviors and eventually overcome their behavior problems. Human beings, including children with disabilities, at times, need to receive and appreciate honest criticism in order to develop an attitude based on realistic appraisal of their strengths and drawbacks (Hwang, 1995). Persons with an accurate grasp of their actual performance are more likely to be successful in their lives than those with a false sense of accomplishments (Moeller, 1994). No students, with or without disabilities, should be told they are successful when they are failing. Such false inflation of self-esteem can only prove to be damaging when these students come upon someone who is unwilling to praise them unless they perform quality work. This collision with reality will eventually occur either farther along in school or when they enter the work force.

Therefore, the role and responsibility of the special education teacher should not be to pamper children with special learning needs by providing unconditional praise, but rather to provide an opportunity for the student with a disability to create his/her own self-esteem by completing a difficult task or learning a new skill. Student learning rarely is improved by injections of positive thinking and psychic boosterism (Leo, 1990). True self-esteem is a product of, not a prerequisite for, accomplishment because self-esteem arises from within, from a genuine sense of achievement and worth (Adler et al., 1992).

Schools have a duty to prepare students with disabilities to function as self-sufficient and independent individuals with realistic life views by showing them the way the world truly operates. Coddling youths with special needs by injecting false self-esteem only perpetuates the cycle of failure and dependency throughout their lives.

Children with handicapping conditions have one strike against them in the first place. Coddling students with praise rather than teaching them the skills they must possess to become functional and independent members of society is nothing but an insidious act of throwing them the second strike. When those misguided and ill-prepared students face the reality of post secondary life and are unable to meet the demands of the real world, they will get the third strike and will be struck out for good. After all, what really determines a person’s future is not so much what one thinks of oneself, but rather what one can do and how well one can do it.

References


