A Case against Heightened Self-Esteem as an Educational Aim

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During the latter part of the twentieth-century and into the twenty-first century, educational systems have increasingly placed a high value on heightened self-esteem as an important aim of education. After all, who of us would want our children not to feel as good about themselves as possible, especially when leading educational researchers proclaim that self-esteem provides a crucial building block on which all our actions and experiences are based. "People who think positively about themselves are healthier, happier, and more productive … self-concept is fundamental to enhancing human potential, from early development and school achievement, to physical/mental health and wellbeing, to cultural identity and social justice" (Shavelson, 2003, p. xiii). The corollary is that low self-esteem is responsible for almost all individual and social difficulties. So pervasive is this phenomenon that many contemporaries "cannot think of a single psychological problem—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to spouse battery or child molestation—that is not traceable to the problem of low self-esteem" (Branden, 1984, p. 12). Given that self-esteem has such profound consequences for every aspect of our existence, it would be unpardonable for schools, educators, and educational researchers to neglect the cultivation of this core human resource. Thus, it is not surprising to find a dramatic and steady increase in research reports and writings about self-esteem cited in major databases such as ERIC, PsycINFO, and Web of Science from 1960 to the present.

Nonetheless, an important attitude of free inquiry is a willingness to put even our most trusted bromides to conceptual, theoretical, and

empirical analysis and evaluation. When self-esteem has been examined in this way, the results and interpretations forthcoming have been much less conclusive than the foregoing statements and sentiments proclaim. In what is perhaps the most comprehensive evaluative review of research and theory concerning the educational and social effects of high self-esteem, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) reach the following general conclusions:

> The benefits of high self-esteem fall into two categories: enhanced initiative and pleasant feelings. We have not found evidence that boosting self-esteem (by therapeutic interventions or school programs) causes benefits. Our findings do not support continued widespread efforts to boost self-esteem in the hope that it will by itself foster improved outcomes. (p. 1)

Of added relevance to education and schooling is their further conclusion that "the modest correlations between self-esteem and school performance do not indicate that high self-esteem leads to good performance. Instead, high self-esteem is partly the result of good school performance" (p. 1) (also see Kohn, 1994).

Although extremely helpful, there is a tendency in such evaluations to give priority to empirical issues and data, as if these alone might resolve the complex social and educational matters at stake. However, questions of educational aims cannot be decided on empirical bases alone, as vital as such information obviously is. For example, given evidence that "self-esteem does lead to greater happiness" (Baumeister et al., 2003, p. 1), should it be promoted actively in schools despite evidence that "efforts to boost the self esteem of pupils have not been shown to improve academic performance and may sometimes be counterproductive" (Baumeister et al., 2003, p. 1)? Any possible resolution of questions such as this requires a turn to educational argument that involves conceptual, theoretical, and critical consideration. As a prelude to such consideration, it is helpful to place our current focus on the self-esteem of students within an historical context that makes connections to the cultural evolution of both educational aims and conceptions of selfhood. Such contextualizing enables a critical reinterpretation of reasons and arguments for advancing heightened self-esteem as an educational aim, which, in turn, suggests alternative possibilities to safeguard the personal and social development of pupils.

Self-Esteem in Historical Context

It is difficult for most contemporaries to imagine that selfhood and self-esteem, understood as aspects of personhood that are central to our existence as individuals with others, are relatively recent arrivals on

the cultural, historical landscape. In English, the word "self," used as a noun, first appeared around 1300, and from then until near the end of the seventeenth century, had primarily negative connotations as a kind of blasphemous arrogance that improperly challenged religious and social orders of the day (Danziger, 1997). However, by 1694, John Locke, in the second edition of his famous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, was able to discuss the self and personal identity in predominately secular terms as an internal focus or point from which individuals could witness and monitor their experiences (Taylor, 1989). Since Locke, human consciousness has become imbued with a self-consciousness that accompanies many or most of our experiences and actions. As a consequence, as selves, we do not *live* in our actions and experiences so much as we possess or *own* them. By the early eighteenth century, the core idea of the self as an "experiencer" (an owner and evaluator of experience) had become associated with a wide set of self compounds, like self-esteem, that gradually had come to occupy secular and positive connotations in everyday speech and activity (Toulmin, 1977).

The self had been invented (Lyons, 1978), and from this time onward, the flow of approval and disapproval that attended the social activities of individuals was understood as directed at their selves, rather than at their specific actions. One important consequence of this linguistic, conceptual, and experiential revolution was that the language of self-evaluation shifted away from conceptions of guilt and sin toward ideas of blameworthiness and self-esteem. Today, the "objectified self that persons now harbor within them is above all an object of approval and disapproval, both by others and by the person herself. This self is always conceived as an object of variable worth, and therefore the desire to raise or maintain its worth comes to be regarded as an identifiable human motive" (Danziger, 1997, p. 143). By the early eighteenth century, even some religious leaders, like Bishop Butler (1726/1950), had concluded that the main trouble with humanity was not that people had an over-abundance of self-love, but that they had too little of the right kind of self-regard.

The idea of "the right kind of self-love" received a highly unique rendering in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, regarded by many as the father of modern progressive education and developmental psychology (Mayer, 1966). Rousseau believed that human beings are naturally inclined toward a form of self-love (*amour de soi*) that is centered around caring for one's self in a manner that blends easily with a genuine concern and sympathy for others, but that this natural self-love is corrupted by societal demands and expectations for individuals to compete with each other for resources and prestige. Society thus breeds a kind of vanity and self-importance (*amour-propre*) that diminishes and twists

authentic self-love and compassion for others. Rousseau produced highly original and influential writings in political and educational theory that advanced possible ways of limiting the corrupting influences of society on its members. The primary purpose of his educational theorizing was "to prevent amour de soi from turning into amour-propre, for this is the true source of man's dividedness" (Bloom, 1979, p. 10). To this end, Rousseau (1762/1979) proposes a developmentally graduated form of education that promotes the self-satisfaction of persons of equality in a way consistent with their natural tendencies toward amour de soi. To avoid premature confrontation with others' wills in a way that would lead to overly strong forms of amour-propre, Rousseau insisted that the early education of the child should be structured in such a manner so that the child will always do what she wants, but that what she wants to do will be what is educationally appropriate. The teacher's role is to arrange judiciously chosen activities to ensure that the child is not required to make social comparisons with others before she is satisfied with herself and truly concerned with others. Since the publication of *Émile* (or *On Education*) in 1762, Rousseau's emphasis on the interests and self-love of the child has influenced more than two centuries of "progressive education," earlier forms of which tended to retain his emphasis on moral and political education, but latter forms of which sometimes have tended to take more decidedly psychological directions.

Although there is considerable debate concerning the precise nature of agreements and disagreements among various educational doctrines that might be included under the banner of progressive education (e.g., Adelman, 2000), it most often is held that Rousseau's ideas initiated and, in many ways, sustained the movement. "Pestalozzi, Herbart, Froebel, the Macmillans, Montessori, Caldwell, Cook, Dewey are his [Rousseau's] successors; and such devices as the Nursery School [Kindergarten], the Dalton Plan, the Play Way, and the Project Method are the practical results of what they taught" (Jacks, 1950). In particular, his emphasis on the interests, activities, and development of pupils gradually became enshrined in a general form of education that focused on the whole person, individual differences in interests and abilities, and learning by doing, especially through play and concrete, problem solving situations. Even more influential was his over-arching concern for the authentic self-esteem of the learner as a buffer against the potentially invidious comparisons with others that are encouraged by traditional modes of education and society in general.

Well-known educators like Pestalozzi, Herbart, and Froebel established the first non-traditional schools and kindergartens in Switzerland and Germany in the late 1700s and early 1800s, and developed a variety

of neo-Rousseauian educational theories and methods. In different ways and with different emphases, all grappled with the tensions between nature and society, self and others, and personal freedom and civic duty/virtue. Many of their educational concerns were highly moral and political—so much so, that several of their followers (especially those of Froebel) arrived in the United States around 1868 as refugees from political ferments in Europe in which their educational ideas were interpreted as threats to church and state (Adelman, 2000).

The moral and political tenor of the early European progressives received an influential rendering in the educational writings of John Dewey, who together with his wife Alice, daughter Evelyn, and colleagues like George Herbert Mead, became immersed in a variety of educational experiments, including the establishment and running of the famous Laboratory School sponsored by the University of Chicago. The educational plan adopted in the Chicago Laboratory School was based initially on Froebel's kindergarten, albeit with a more explicitly social and pragmatic rendering, and consisted largely of following and responding to the child's nature (Deegan, 1999). Although Dewey's emphasis on children's play and interests frequently was interpreted as a misplaced abandonment of more traditional educational aims and methods, Dewey was primarily concerned with achieving a social democratic via media between what too frequently are cast as oppositional polarities, such as curriculum content versus learner interest, and self versus community. For example, in a succinct response to his critics (Dewey, 1938), he makes it clear that starting with the life experience and interests of the child in no way precludes ending with the organized subject-matter of the established disciplines.

> The utilization of subject-matter found in the present life-experience of the learner … is perhaps the best illustration that can be found of the basic principle of using existing experience as the means of carrying learners on to a wider, more refined, and better organized environing world, physical and human, than is found in the experiences from which educative growth sets out. (p. 82)

In a similar manner, starting by safeguarding the self-interest and self-esteem of the learner in no way precludes ending with community involvement and interest in others. Most of Dewey's educational writings are concerned with describing in theoretical detail the conditions and processes involved in such educational transformations.

Progressive emphases on the nature, development, and self-esteem of the child also held considerable attraction to the developing discipline of psychology. By the early twentieth century, the ideas not only of Rousseau, but also of Darwin, Freud, and others had created a theoretical

and practical niche within which psychology could develop rapidly as a social science and profession that claimed unique expertise in matters relating to the self (cf. Baumeister, 1987; Cushman, 1995, Herman, 1995). The burgeoning presence of psychology in educational and other social institutions received enormous support from the opening up of the new field of personality psychology, which quickly became joined to social, developmental, and educational branches of the discipline. Perhaps no single psychologist was more directly responsible for establishing a psychological science of personality and selfhood than Gordon Allport (1937), an individual who directly and indirectly influenced subsequent generations of psychologists and educational psychologists concerned with both self-expression and self-management.

> Allport mapped out a self that reflected the new realities of industrial, urban America. This was a self that could be known, governed, managed; it was a self that could be embraced by employers and officialdom and one to which upwardly mobile individuals could aspire. Paradoxically, this was also a self that promised liberation from standardization and a heightened level of individuality. Individual measurement would transform an intangible value—individuality—into an empirical reality and in the process would free Americans from the sociological straitjacket of group-based categories. (Nicholson, 2003, pp. 100-101)

Allport's central contribution was to advance an approach to selfhood that combined concern for scientific rigor and control with humanistic impulses for self-development and fulfillment.

In the 1950s and 1960s, humanistic psychologists like Abraham Maslow (1954) and Carl Rogers (1957) reacted against the prevailing behaviorism of the day, and spear-headed a renewed focus on internal processes in psychology, with an emphasis on individually unique, affectively laden experiences. In educational psychology, numerous studies began to focus attention on the self-esteem and self-concept of school children, often in terms of congruency between self descriptions and self ideals (e.g., Long, Henderson, & Ziller, 1967; Soares & Soares, 1969). Others focused on relationships between measures of self-concept/self-esteem and academic achievement and motivation, a focus that continues into the present day (e.g., Wigfield & Karpathian, 1991). What is perhaps most interesting about the vast literature concerning self-concept and self-esteem in school contexts is that although it was initiated by humanistic impulses to recognize the uniqueness and emotional experience of children in school settings, it quickly evolved through mergers with more traditionally scientific forms of psychology and educational psychology, much as Allport's pioneering work in personality and selfhood had presaged.

One such merger was with psychometricians who developed numer-

ous scales and subscales for the measurement of self-esteem and self-concept during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (e.g., Piers & Harris, 1964). A second merger occurred once the cognitive revolution in psychology and applied psychology had taken a firm hold in education by the late 1960s, and involved a new breed of cognitive psychologists interested in structures and operations of cognition in classroom settings that included motivational and affective components (e.g., Shavelson & Bolus, 1982). By the dawn of the twenty-first century, approximately 3,000 studies of self-esteem and/or self-concept were listed in the ERIC database (Martin, 2004). Many of these examined the factor structure and psychometric properties of an expanding array of measures and scales (e.g., Byrne & Shavelson, 1986; Winne & Walsh, 1980). Many also examined relationships among measures of self-esteem/self-concept, academic achievement and motivation, and a number of other personality variables (e.g., Ames & Felkner, 1979; Jordan, 1981).

The self experiences of learners that are described and rated in what have become standard measures of self-esteem and self-concept such as *The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*, the *Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory*, and the *Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale for Children* contain items (respectively) such as: "I feel that I do not have much to be proud of," "All in all, I'm inclined to feel that I'm a failure," and "I am good in my school work." Although self-esteem sometimes is differentiated from self-concept in that the former is a judgment of one's self-worth while the latter is a description of one's self-understanding, many scales and studies of self-esteem and self-concept conflate these distinctions (Greer, 2003), unless one assumes that inclusion or exclusion of the words "I feel that" in items such as those just cited is sufficient to capture the difference between a judgment of self-worth and a description of self-understanding. At any rate, the now voluminous literature in educational psychology that has accumulated around the promotion of the self-esteem and self-concepts of school children and adolescents generally places a high premium on self-discovery, self-expression, and self-fulfillment without much explicit discussion of broader educational aims, or social, cultural, moral, and political contexts of education.

An ever expanding panoply of psychoeducational interventions now is in place in most North American school systems that targets enhanced self-esteem as a primary goal, quite independently of any other educational aims (cf. Canfield & Wells, 1994; McDaniel & Bielen, 1990). With the wide-spread acceptance of these products of psychological science and practice by educators and the general public in Western societies, self-expression and individual fulfillment now stand as educational aims in their own right, separated from, and sometimes seemingly in

competition with, institutional aims of schooling that traditionally have emphasized citizenship as an active, effective participation in the political, economic, sociocultural, and moral practices that constitute life with others within communities and nations (Olson, 2003). Even when such more long-standing aims of education are mentioned by proponents of self-concept and self-esteem, they now are likely to be treated as derivative from these apparently more important inner, psychological resources.

> A positive self-concept is widely considered fundamental for psychological health, personal achievement, and positive relationships. Self-concept is thought to make such a difference, that people who think positively about themselves are healthier, happier, and more productive. Hence, enhancing self-concept is considered necessary to maximizing human potential, from early development and school achievement, to physical/mental health and well being, to gainful employment and other contributions to society. (Craven, Marsh, & Burnett, 2003, p. 96)

Critical Considerations

But, is the educational cultivation of enhanced self-concept and self-esteem really capable of contributing to personal and social betterment in the manner envisioned by so many contemporary educators? As mentioned earlier, several scholars recently have challenged the empirical basis for such an assertion (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003; Kohn, 1994). However, there also are important conceptual, theoretical, and critical considerations that mitigate against such a sweeping conclusion.

In a recent discussion of contemporary conceptions of authentic self-expression and fulfillment, Charles Guignon (2004) noted that the authentic person in contemporary society is thought of as one who understands her own feelings and expresses them transparently in her actions. However, Guignon challenges the idea that authenticity is only a matter of inner, emotional experience and expression. He points out that authenticity also requires a commitment backed by reason. Importantly, he goes on to argue that any such reasoned commitment only can arise in the context of shared practices and values within a social context. Charles Taylor (1991) makes a similar point in recognizing that any human agent who seeks significance and meaning in life must exist within a horizon of important questions, and that such a horizon only is available within an historically established, sociocultural way of life. The upshot of such reasoning is that personally and socially productive forms of self-expression and self-fulfillment, of the sort envisioned by Branden (1994), Canfield and Wells (1994), Craven et al. (2003), McDaniel and Bielen (1990), and so many others cannot issue from the activities of

an isolated, detached psychological self, attentive primarily to its own internal experiences and feelings.

Democratic organizations (classrooms, schools, communities, and nations) only work when their members exercise discernment and judgment with respect to at least some shared goals and beliefs. When someone does not stand behind her beliefs, she fails to sustain a democratic social system that is predicated on exactly that which she now fails to do. But, standing behind one's beliefs, in a manner conducive to full participation in democratic exchanges and institutions, is not primarily a matter of having elevated self-esteem. A free and democratic society is possible only if its members are committed to the unrestricted exchange of views. And, such exchange assumes that citizens are persons, with moral commitments and reasons, who are knowledgeable about the issues that confront them and their society.

Consequently, the role of education in democratic societies must be to ensure some minimally acceptable level of knowing and understanding that goes well beyond our own interiors, and attends to the world in which we live with others, and what we currently know about it (even if such knowledge is always being revised, and is never certain). In other words, authentic selfhood or personhood is possible only in the context of shared traditions, practices, and ways of life with others. When conceptions and models of self-esteem and self-concept focus only on the feelings and experiences of individuals, they provide much too narrow a venue for the education of persons and citizens.

The fact that so many proponents of self-esteem in the classroom and school have little to say about moral and political matters is indicative of the pervasive individualism that afflicts this area of contemporary educational theory, research, and practice, and its relative neglect of the social, cultural (including the moral and political) constitution and concerns of fully functioning citizens and persons. It simply is educationally unsound to hold that the fostering of self-esteem and self-concept in classrooms is an adequate basis for the preparation of students as full participants in those sociocultural contexts in which they are embedded.

Instead of encouraging students in schools to "turn inward" in ways that privilege their own experiences, feelings, and perspectives, Philippe Meirieu (2005) maintains that school is a place where children must learn to disengage from their own experiences, situations, and preoccupations through ongoing interaction with other children and the curriculum. "L'École doit aider l'enfant à renoncer à être au centre du monde" (p. 68). They must learn that there are conventions and practices of correctness and truth that resist their own desires, and that they must participate in such practices and judge themselves and others accordingly. For

Meirieu, a critical aspect of this escape from their immediate desires is learning to respect and consider other perspectives. "À l'École, on apprend à passer progressivement de son point de vue et de ses intérêts personnels à la researche du bien commun" (p. 72). Indeed, a major goal of education is to help children take and evaluate different perspectives in cooperation with others within problem situations. For Meirieu, such perspective taking is an indispensable ingredient in the development of students as persons and citizens.

Schooling provides many excellent venues for the study and facilitation of personal development as an expansion of the perspectives available to students. Taking and evaluating different perspectives encountered in formal curricula and informal classroom activities is an important part of the educational process in any society, but is especially critical for the preparation of citizens in democratic societies. The self-development of persons and citizens is not primarily a matter of turning inwards to discover one's authentic self, or of carefully cultivating a positive self-image, self-concept, or repertoire of self-regulatory strategies. As possibly useful as any of these might be, they are of limited educational value unless they make contact with perspectives available in interpersonal and community activity, including those perspectives that constitute a representative sampling of what currently are considered to be our best theories and practices in subject areas as diverse as history, mathematics, biology, athletics, and the fine and performing arts.

Tensions in the Education of Persons

The foregoing critical, conceptual, and theoretical considerations, in combination with extant challenges to empirical assumptions linking self-esteem to higher levels of academic attainment and social functioning (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2003), raise serious concerns about the adequacy of elevated self-esteem as a free-standing educational aim, or as an educational means for advancing either personal or social goals of schooling. However, by themselves, they do not suggest that the personal development of students is not a valid educational goal that might be set alongside more social aims of schooling such as the promotion of good citizenship, social contribution, and care for others. The sole conclusion that follows from what has been said thus far is that elevated self-esteem is not an educationally valid end, either in itself or by virtue of its relationship to other educational aims concerning the personal and social development of students. This conclusion may be sufficient reason to move away from classroom activities such as making a "commercial for oneself" in which students are directed to make "advertisements and commercials

to sell themselves" (Canfield & Wells, 1994, p. 125) or to participate in "realizing your uniqueness" lessons (McDaniel & Bielen, 1990, p. 156). However, the larger educational questions concerning possible tensions between, and ways of reconciling personal and social, institutional goals of schooling are not in any way decided by what has been said to this point. Since it is highly likely that the salience of concerns for elevated self-esteem in contemporary schools is related to such tensions and their resolution, a brief consideration of these matters is warranted.

Olson (2003) provides a useful point of departure for a discussion of personal development as possibly incompatible with more long-standing, institutional goals of schooling to produce graduates who are able to fit easily into the economic, political, social, and moral life of their communities.

> Although humane feelings and personal morality are important, they are not, in my view, the primary concern of the school; people have a right to think and feel as they like. The goal of the school is much more limited, namely, teaching students how to participate in the bureaucratic institutions of the larger society. Thus, students must be taught how to engage with systematic, disciplined knowledge; to understand how the rule of law imparts both entitlements and responsibilities; and to recognize how the public institutions of the society allow them to pursue and achieve their own personal or local cultural goals. Whether or not they love knowledge and empathize with others is, perhaps, less important than that they know their duty and the rights and privileges that are earned by living up to it. Schools cannot and need not reform human nature. They have a more limited responsibility, namely, teaching the young how to live in a complex society composed of institutions for knowledge, justice, the economy, and the like … Education teaches one to live with and interact productively with others one may never have met but who share competence with a common set of institutions and a common commitment to explicit norms and standards and the rule of law. (p. 296)

Thus, in Olson's view, it is not the job of schools to teach children to love or esteem themselves, others, learning, or knowledge, or to develop personally in ways conducive to such caring. Instead, the purpose of schooling is to help children acquire knowledge and capability of participating within those shared institutional practices within which one identifies as citizen, professional, friend, colleague, and so forth. Throughout his book, Olson (2003) argues that any educational application of psychological approaches to personal development is doomed to fail unless it recognizes and accepts the institutional nature of schooling. As institutions, schools are responsible to the states that create them. Schools are charged with setting and maintaining standards, procedures, norms, and rules for learning, thinking, and knowing. What contemporary advocates of children's self-esteem seem not to understand, along with their arguably

more educationally sophisticated progressive predecessors like Dewey, is that these institutional concerns and practices with respect to learning and knowing cannot be identified with child-centered initiatives that treat learning and development as matters of learners experientially exploring their local world and culture (Olson, 2003, p. 291).

It is obvious that institutional mandates of schooling cannot be identified with the personal caprice of individual children. Nonetheless, to suggest that thoughtful progressives like Dewey (whom Olson obviously admires) are confused about social, institutional and personal, developmental goals of education seems unwarranted. In particular, such a critical assessment appears to depend on an overly strong distinction between self and society, of the sort that Dewey, together with other early American pragmatists, like George Herbert Mead, found to be untenable.

That schools are institutions with societal mandates to prepare individuals for full participation in societies is undeniable, and certainly is at odds with the elevation of enhanced self-esteem as an educational goal in the absence of demonstrable causal association with such mandates. However, beginning, at least in part, with the interests and activities of children is not necessarily incompatible in ending with the kind of social, institutional understanding and capability that Olson (2003) champions as the chief aim of schooling. In 1938, Dewey responded to critics of his educational ideas in a way that emphasized his approach to educational development as charting a trajectory from the child's interest and activity to the social, institutional participation of full and active citizenship. Here, as previously noted, he stated that his intention in beginning with subject matter found in the current life experience of the learner was in accordance with "the basic principle of using existing experience as the means of carrying learners on to a wider, more refined, and better organized environing world, physical and human, than is found in the experiences from which educative growth sets out" (p. 82).

Dewey's theory of educational development assumed a unique kind of social psychology that he borrowed in large part from George Herbert Mead. Instead of setting social reality against individual psychological development, Mead understood meaning, mind, and self-consciousness to derive mostly through participation in routine social actions with others. For Mead, such ongoing interactivity allows developing individuals to take the attitudes and perspectives of particular others and of society in general and apply them to themselves and the physical and social world (Gillespie, 2005; Martin, 2006). It is precisely because children take and react to perspectives available in the interpersonal, social activity that they become selves at all. When the constitution of selfhood through social interactivity is fully appreciated, there is no sharp divide between social

(including institutional) practices and personal psychological growth and development because the latter is cut from the cloth of the former.

Consequently, Olson is correct to suggest that the institutional mandates of schools cannot be identified with the personal experiences of students, but it is only through participation in sociocultural practices (including institutional practices) that learners develop as persons and citizens. When this is clearly understood, there is no choice other than to educate experientially, beginning with the child's experiences to date and gradually, as her understanding and capability warrant, making available an ever expanding array of social, disciplinary, and institutional perspectives with which she can interact, and through such interaction develop increasingly organized, sophisticated, and nuanced understandings of her self and the sociocultural and biophysical world.

Self development thus occurs together with educational and social development. We are immersed in social and institutional practices from birth, and our participation in them constitutes us as persons—i.e., social and moral agents with rights and responsibilities. The real tension that Olson (2003) is concerned about is not between the institutional practices of schooling and individual psychological development, but between competing sociocultural practices found in contemporary liberal, democratic societies. This is a tension between social and psychological practices that privilege individual freedom and development, and social and psychological practices that privilege civic duty and responsibility to others. The problem is that liberal democratic societies embrace both of these sets of practices and their attendant virtues. In critiquing enhanced self-esteem as an educational aim, one is critiquing a set of discernible social practices that currently are highly influential in promoting forms of personal development that are centered too narrowly on the experience of individuals in the absence of appropriately educative concerns for the expansion of such experience through contact with other understandings and perspectives. Instead of encouraging school children and adolescents to look within to find personal significance, educators and schools should always be encouraging students to expand their experience, perspectives, and understanding. If Dewey and Mead were correct, this can be done without sacrificing either personal development or the institutional mandates of school because educational development necessarily includes personal development.

Conclusion

Without evidence that the enhancement of students' self-esteem promotes greater levels of academic achievement or other distinctly

educational benefits (cf. Baumeister et al., 2003), there is little empirical support for heightened self-esteem as an educational aim. Moreover, an historical sketch of the emergence of enhanced self-esteem as an educational goal suggests that important distinctions among types of self-esteem that may be more or less educationally and socially (including morally and politically) productive gradually have been eroded in more contemporary educational inquiry and practice. Such erosion has resulted, especially in Western nations, in psychoeducational practices and interventions that may be criticized for an over emphasis on individualism. In some instances, it seems as if students are encouraged to pursue their self-interest at the expense of acquiring knowledge and understanding about, and engaging with, perspectives and interests different from their own. In consequence, the acquisition and critical consideration of a wide variety of viable and productive perspectives typical of educational development may suffer when enhanced self-esteem is isolated as a major educational aim.

Some (e.g., Olson, 2003) have argued that personal development in general (whether in the specific form of enhanced self-esteem or not) is incompatible with the institutional mandates of schools to prepare students for citizenship and productive participation in the economic, political, legal, and moral structures of their societies. However, such a position may be predicated on too strong a divide between personal development and education for civic virtue and participation. Early American pragmatists, like Dewey (1938) and Mead (1934, 1938), objected to such dualistic formulations. They pointed out that self-development was inextricably bound up with the taking, experiencing, and application of a diversity of perspectives. In this way, they tied self-development directly to the experience of points of view and modes of understanding that went beyond students' current circumstances, knowledge, and self-interest. "[E]xperience does not occur in a vacuum. There are sources outside an individual that give rise to experience. It is constantly fed from these springs" (Dewey, 1938, p. 40). From this point of view, it is not self-esteem per se that is problematic, but overly individualistic, narrow, and instrumentally self-interested sociocultural orientations and practices. When self-esteem is set within such a context, attempts to enhance it might prove to be more dogmatic than educational.

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