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OPINION Top Performers Blog



Getting Social and Emotional Learning Right

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By Marc Tucker July 5, 2017



On June 28, the Fordham Institute published a blog by Checker Finn titled "[Schools Are Still Peddling the Self-Esteem Hoax](#)" that sparked an energetic and interesting debate. I thought I would weigh in.

In his piece, Checker takes aim at the 'self-esteem' movement, and then stands over the dead body of his target to aim his next shot at the 'social-emotional learning' movement.

As you know, I tend to come at things from an international comparative perspective, so it won't surprise you to learn that my take on 'self-esteem' is framed in part by the data from the OECD that show that American students, who perform very poorly on mathematics compared to the other advanced industrial countries, [think they do quite well at mathematics](#), while the students from the countries with the best mathematics performance do not rate their knowledge of mathematics as highly. From that perspective, self-esteem is definitely not our problem. Performance is our problem.

On the other hand, one of the things that has really impressed us about the schools serving very vulnerable children in East Asia is their strategy for dealing with students who all too often grow up in circumstances that teach them not to trust adults—any adults. These kids often come to school fearful and unwilling to engage. In places like Hong Kong and Singapore, the faculties of such schools embrace the motto: 'First the Heart, Then the Head.'

They know they cannot reach these young people in order to engage them in learning until they first do what they need to do to earn their trust. The faculty in these schools will go to court if they have to intercede on the student's behalf with a judge, buy them lunch if they cannot afford one on their own, stay in school until 8:00 or 8:30 p.m. if the student has no safe place to go.

None of this invalidates Checker's point that building self-esteem is pointless if building self-esteem is seen as a substitute for real achievement. The impressive thing about the schools I am describing is that they are uncompromising on the standards they set for student achievement. But, at the same time, they will work, sometimes for years, to build the social and emotional foundation on which the student's cognitive development will then be built. If a student comes to school believing that no adult can be trusted, the futures available to more fortunate children will forever be denied to them and a life of crime is better than no life at all.

At first, this might appear to run counter to Checker's argument. But I don't think that is the case. At one point in his blog, he cites the "...traditional obligation of schools to impart academic skills and knowledge." One might suppose that this is an invitation to regard anything that does not contribute to that goal as outside the proper role of the school. But it turns out that his real beef is not with non-cognitive goals *per se* but the particular selection of non-cognitive goals embraced by the [Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning](#) (CASEL). He sees goals like 'self-confidence' and 'self-efficacy' as suspiciously close to the not-so-esteemed goal of 'self-esteem.' And he wonders what happened to other goals that the organization might have chosen to mention or to highlight, but did not, like ethics, morality, integrity, courage or honesty.

This made me smile. It turns out that the debate is not about whether schools should be pursuing non-cognitive goals, but rather which non-cognitive goals should be pursued. And I find myself in Checker's corner here. Perhaps I am very old fashioned, but I see a certain tendency in some quarters toward a

rather self-absorbed—on the one hand—and patronizing—on the other hand—outlook that reminds me not a little of what Checker calls the "self-esteem hoax."

Let's be clear here. The social and emotional development of students is not a new goal for education or schools. It is as old as the hills—or Aristotle. That set of goals was probably more important than cognitive goals to the headmasters of Eton and Harrow when the Duke of Wellington went to school there. Self-discipline, teamwork, leadership and moral development were said to be the whole point of playing English rugby, which is why the Duke was famously but erroneously quoted as saying that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of his alma mater. And Checker is undoubtedly right in thinking that the headmasters of those esteemed schools were not so interested in developing their students' self-esteem or self-efficacy.

The first school to be developed in the United States on the model of the great English public schools was the Groton Academy. It was to be the prep school of choice for the sons of the great barons of finance and industry as the Gilded Age was coming to an end. Interestingly, it was these very titans of industry and finance who insisted that the dorms at Groton be cold and tiny and devoid of anything that smacked of privilege and a life of ease. They did not want their sons to grow up soft and entitled. They wanted them to be tough and disciplined and self-reliant. Was that part of the curriculum? You bet it was.

Americans have often been ambivalent about the non-cognitive goals of education. We often hear parents say that they want the schools to teach their kids the "Three Rs" and they will take care of the rest. Or other parents say that they are pulling their kids out of school because the schools are teaching values they don't share. This is probably what comes of living in a country largely populated by immigrants from very different places, bringing with them a plethora of religious, ethnic and national backgrounds. And that's probably why, when you read schools' goal statements, they seem so devoid of any

serious statement about what that community really values. Yup, don't we all believe that all students should reach their full potential, grow up to fully participate in the country's political life, be prepared for work and to be solid contributors to family and community?

For comparison's sake, here's what Singapore's Ministry of Education has posted on its web site about the [goals Singapore has for its students](#):

The person who is schooled in the Singapore Education system embodies the Desired Outcomes of Education. He has a good sense of self-awareness, a sound moral compass, and the necessary skills and knowledge to take on challenges of the future. He is responsible to his family, community and nation. He appreciates the beauty of the world around him, possesses a healthy mind and body, and has a zest for life. In sum, he is

- *a confident person who has a strong sense of right and wrong, is adaptable and resilient, knows himself, is discerning in judgment, thinks independently and critically, and communicates effectively;*
- *a self-directed learner who takes responsibility for his own learning, who questions, reflects and perseveres in the pursuit of learning;*
- *an active contributor who is able to work effectively in teams, exercises initiative, takes calculated risks, is innovative and strives for excellence; and,*
- *a concerned citizen who is rooted to Singapore, has a strong civic consciousness, is informed, and takes an active role in bettering the lives of others around him.*

Nothing self-absorbed about that. Nothing to suggest that self-actualization is more important than learning something. There will be some among you, I am sure, who will say, "Yes, but isn't Singapore the place that used to put you in jail for throwing chewing gum on the sidewalk and cane you for using drugs?" Yes, it was. But ask almost any Singaporean whether they would prefer to live in Singapore or somewhere else and the answer will come flying back: Singapore is it for them.

I invite you to read this statement of goals and ask yourself, what do you not agree with? What is missing? What is new and what is as old as the hills? Which goals have always been there for everyone and which are goals that used to be only for a small elite? Please note that only one of these goals—"communicates effectively"—says a thing about learning anything in particular or to a particular standard. Yet Singapore has consistently been at or very near the summit of the PISA and TIMSS league tables year after year. Clearly, Singapore places great value on cognitive development. So, when it comes right down to it, Singapore puts its money on a set of goals for students that speaks directly to some old-time virtues that Checker mentioned, like perseverance, morality, civic consciousness (and by implication patriotism), taking initiative, excellence and responsibility.

If this is what Checker meant, then I stand with Checker.

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About this blog:

Marc Tucker is president of the National Center on Education and the Economy. For two decades, his research has focused on the policies and practices of the countries with the best education systems. His latest book is *Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems*.



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