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Self-Esteem and New Age in Public Schools

Self-esteem is the latest fad in the public schools, and educators are starting courses and politicians are creating commissions to manufacture this wonderful quality. A lack of self-esteem is supposed to be the reason why children do poorly on standardized tests, and courses in self-esteem are now offered as the cure-all for everything from illiteracy to poverty to drug abuse to teen pregnancy to racism.

An argument could be made that some children have too much self-esteem. In an international math test last year for 13-year-olds, Americans came in last on math, but came in first in agreeing with the statement “I am good at mathematics.”

Of course, it’s good to feel good about yourself, but it’s not good for students to feel good about doing bad. It reminds us of the pop psychology of the 1920s when Emile Coue made an international reputation promoting the slogan, “Every day in every way, I’m getting better and better.”

Students should learn the difference between earned self-esteem based on achievement and automatic self-esteem which may come from an artificial course having no relation to reality. To teach a child self-esteem when he is illiterate is setting him up for a rude awakening when he finds he cannot get a job.

The teaching of self-esteem in the classroom is clearly psychological, not academic. It is part of the 20-year trend to promote what is called the therapeutic classroom, making it a place for treating social problems instead of learning knowledge and skills.

Since there is no academic discipline called self-esteem, and there are no guidelines or standards, writers of self-esteem curricula reach out for any idea they can find. To the dismay of many parents, some courses involve techniques and practices commonly associated with the New Age ideology.

If you visit your local bookstore, you can note how many shelves display New Age books. Somebody must be buying these books for booksellers to stock so many, and if you do any browsing, you will quickly discover that it is a religious movement.

In Nebraska, a public school curriculum called “SOS: Strengthening of Skills” stirred up a firestorm of controversy. Parents testified at a school. Board meeting that they objected to its techniques of visualization, relaxation, and affirmations because they are elements of New Age, Hindu, and other Eastern religions.

The SOS curriculum taught students that they could “unblock themselves by visualizing a magic ring or wand or a magic energy mill or a powerful companion.” Parents took vigorous exception to the school teaching children about magic or a “powerful companion” who might be a spirit guide or deity of some alien religion.

Parents particularly object to the technique called “centering,” that is, imagining that you have an empty space in the center of your body which can be filled by new energy. Parents believe that classroom visualizations encourage children to escape from reality by fantasizing themselves into a fantasy situation.

In Indiana, a curriculum called “Tactics for Thinking” caused an uproar not only among parents, but teachers, too. They didn’t like being used as amateur psychotherapists to practice “deep processing” (a type of visualization) or “power thinking” (a technique to change attitudes). They objected to the complete restructuring of the curriculum to conform to ambiguous experimental goals.

The guided imagery of this course taught students to close their eyes and pretend to be a snowflake, imaging what the snowflake tastes and smells and hears. Another exercise was to imagine seeing a blue ball in your mind’s eye.

Michigan 7th graders were told to take a “mini-vacation” by closing their eyes and visualize being somewhere else in “your own private place.” In Alabama, students listened to relaxation tapes which led them on a guided fantasy trip to a secret place where they could sit in a white beam of light and get the answers to their questions from a wise rabbit.

Jack Canfield, who says he has observed “the application of guided imagery to the classroom” for ten years, calls it “a very powerful psychological took.” In his book, *The Inner Classroom: Teaching With Guided Imagery*, Canfield wrote that guided imagery is a tool to “facilitate psychological growth” and to “evoke inner wisdom.”

As a results of numerous complaints, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has issued a statement allowing employees to invoke their First

Amendment rights in refusing to attend training programs using meditation, guided visualization, self-hypnosis, and other New Age techniques. If such practices are questionable for adults, then their presence in the public school classroom is intolerable.