

Enhancing children

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1. Introduction

Educational policy in the UK has taken an interesting turn. The preoccupation with standards in schools which has been with us for many years has given rise to a set of aims which policy-makers would hardly have recognised two decades ago. Not only should educators pursue the traditional aims of imparting knowledge, understanding and skills to children. They should set the scene for such aims by getting children into an ‘appropriate condition’ from which to learn. This can mean anything from eating a good breakfast to playing outdoors or developing good ‘social and emotional skills’. Schools should promote these ‘conditions for learning’ as seriously as they have always promoted learning itself. This idea has spawned an abundance of social research, policy initiatives, business ventures and public debate. But does it make sense?

The idea emerged in the highly politicised educational climate of the 1990s, in which the alleged failures of mass education were giving rise to an obsession with standards in schools. The ills of under-achievement, disaffection and violence would dissipate, it was thought, if only standards could be raised. But a difficulty emerged. A standards agenda involves identifying and possibly shaming children and schools that fail. The social consequences of educational failure include disaffection, delinquency, violence and so on: the very problems that the standards agenda set out to address. Such an agenda may help some children, but for others, arguably, it makes matters worse by drawing attention to their failures and making them feel unworthy and excluded.

It was this concern that led to a supplementary agenda focusing on so-called non-cognitive traits like confidence, motivation, resilience, well-being and self-esteem. Such traits are thought to be possessed by individuals to a greater or lesser degree, and to play a crucial part in learning. Children with low confidence levels or poor self-esteem, for example, are seen as more easily frustrated and defeated by challenges than children who have high levels of these. The idea emerged that there are necessary *affective* conditions for successful learning, and that these can be usefully boosted, heightened or enhanced.

I shall call this the enhancement agenda in education. It may be pointed out, rightly, that educationalists sometimes talk about enhancing attainment or achievement, as though the enhancement agenda is not distinct from the standards agenda after all. But the typical use of the term ‘enhancement’ is not this. More frequently, its object is some sort of affective disposition, or a condition like ‘well-being’ that presupposes certain affective dispositions. The enhancement agenda is not simply about getting children to perform better. It is about getting them to *feel* better—more motivated, more confident, happier—and about the idea that feeling good in these ways leads to success at school and in life generally.

The upshot of these ideas is that schools have a duty to enhance certain feelings, and recent policy documents like the Children’s Plan (2007) and the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) (2005) programme are full of exhortations to schools to fulfil this duty, and guidance about how to go about it. The former identifies as one of its ‘goals for 2020’: ‘to enhance children and young people’s well-being, particularly at transition points in their lives’ (Children’s Plan Executive Summary, p.19). It goes on to describe the ‘positive activities’ that ‘develop social and personal skills’ and ‘promote well-being’ (ibid, p. 20). The SEAL Guidance goes into greater detail, and includes a section called ‘Managing Feelings’, in which children are taught to say things like: ‘I know what makes me feel good and know how to enhance these comfortable feelings.’ Another section from the SEAL Guidance called ‘Going for Goals!’ talks about an inspection framework that will assess outcomes like ‘enjoyment’, rather than focusing simply on attainment.

As with many policy ideas, much of this is laudable. The Children’s Plan in particular takes a practical approach to well-being, accepting the responsibility of the government to put real money into the support of families, the provision of safe play areas, health promotion, housing etc. (It remains to be seen whether these worthy intentions will be realised.) More problematic is the idea that schools should undertake to enhance children’s feelings directly, through a variety of expertly devised strategies. It is not obvious, in the first place, that one can identify particular feelings as unconditionally good, so that more is necessarily better. In general, confidence is a beneficial feeling to have, but it can be excessive and associated with risky behaviour.

Some important empirical research (Emler, 2001) has prompted questions about the benefits of feelings (and attitudes) that are assumed to be positively linked to effective learning.

There are also ethical and conceptual questions about the project of enhancing feelings. Philosopher Richard Smith (2002) has expressed concerns about the ‘inward turn’ in education, and Ecclestone talks about the recent ‘therapeutic ethos’ as emphasising ‘fragile identities’, turning children into victims. More fundamentally, one needs to raise the conceptual question: what exactly is it that educators and policy-makers are seeking to enhance? The Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning at the Institute of Education in London (2008) has usefully documented the bewildering variety of terms associated with the concept of enhancement in current educational policy. Many of these employ the term ‘self’: for example, self-esteem, self-discipline, self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy and self-regulation. There are several ‘umbrella’ terms which are thought to embrace a variety of ‘skills’ or ‘qualities’: non-cognitive skills, socio-emotional abilities, well-being, emotional intelligence etc. And there are some familiar terms which already have a secure place in the home and classroom, like perseverance, resilience and motivation. An enhancement agenda that is worth its salt needs to rationalise this assortment of terms and clarify its basic aims.

In Section 2, I explore what I call an ordinary concept of enhancement as a component of moral education. I suggest that the primary object of enhancement in this context is feeling, emotion or passion. We try, for example, to enhance children’s confidence and hope, and conversely to inhibit feelings like fear, shame and despair. We try to do this appropriately rather than indiscriminately, for the context is all-important. There are times, we feel, when children should be encouraged to experience more rather than less shame or fear. However, there are loose connections between emotion and learning which educators need to be aware of. In general, children do not learn well when they experience high levels of shame or fear.

This brief introduction to the concept of enhancement is based on the philosophy of Aristotle, and it leads to a discussion in section 3 of the enhancement agenda in current educational policy. This involves measuring and then enhancing ‘something’ that is believed to cause children to learn. The indeterminacy of this ‘something’, the concept of

measurement and some empirical disagreements about causality will occupy us here. I shall question the shift from an informal enhancement agenda (in the classroom and the home) to a more formal version of this in the domain of public policy.

Finally, I explore the concept of self-esteem, and present an account of this concept that in my view deserves a place in education. Concepts go in and out of fashion, and this one has passed its peak. This is partly because outrageous claims have been made on its behalf, and partly because of an empirical study that claimed to overturn our cherished assumptions about self-esteem. When Polly Toynbee (2001) hailed this study in an article headed “At last we can abandon that tosh about low self-esteem”, some of us knew that the matter deserved a closer look.

2. Enhancement and its objects

What does ‘enhancement’ mean? Dictionaries are not always useful philosophically, but in this case the Shorter Oxford Dictionary gets us off to a good start. ‘Enhancement’ (the dictionary tells us) comes from the Latin root ‘altus’, meaning ‘high’. To enhance is to ‘lift, raise or set up’. It generally means raising or increasing ‘the price, value, importance or attractiveness’ of something.

The concept of enhancement thus has a spatial aspect and a normative dimension. It is not used literally in a spatial sense (we do not ‘enhance’ the pictures on our walls when we raise them), but there is an analogue to the spatial aspect which the dictionary fails to mention. This is the notion of ‘heightening’ (or intensifying) a property, quality or sensation. Your graphics software allows you to enhance the colours on your screen; in a similar sense, a beauty therapist may enhance your tan. An audio technician may enhance the sound on your hi-fi, and a meal or sexual experience or afternoon in the sun may enhance your sensations of pleasure. I shall call this the intensity dimension.

Both the intensity and normative dimensions are relevant to the enhancement agenda in education. This agenda is based on the idea that successful learning presupposes certain ways of feeling. This suggests at least two things: 1) that there is greater value in some feelings than in others (the normative dimension); and 2) that it is possible for educators to ‘heighten’ the feelings that are valuable, and inhibit feelings that are less so (the intensity dimension). There is generally greater value, for example, in

remaining calm before difficult learning challenges than in getting agitated and frustrated by them. ‘Calming children down’, i.e. enhancing pleasant, hopeful feelings at the expense of painful, hopeless ones, is therefore the business of educators.

However this suggestion may worry us in various ways.

1. Although we can imagine contexts in which ‘calming a child down’ seems like the right thing to do, we can also imagine contexts in which this would be wrong. Particular children may be better off agitated; it may be their way of getting down to some serious, creative work, or thinking through a problem. In this case the ambition to calm them down may seem patronising and misconceived.
2. There is arguably a sinister aspect to the notion of enhancement, associated with notions like manipulation and control. If enhancing a child’s confidence is like intensifying the colour saturation on a computer, this sounds intrusive and even tyrannical. The opposite idea of ‘inhibiting’ children’s feelings may also sound warning bells. There is a fine line between inhibition and repression, and most of us would worry about educators who seek to do the latter.

Such concerns may be alleviated by a brief look at Aristotle’s theory of moral education, which is the background for this discussion. Though not universally accepted in every detail, Aristotle’s theory of moral education as the cultivation of ‘sentimental dispositions’ is, many feel, a fundamentally correct account. It captures the basic principles of thought and practice in this area, and provides strong answers to the concerns set out above. Aristotle did not use a term corresponding exactly to the English term ‘enhance’, but he was concerned, as we are, with ways in which (as I should like to put it) adults ‘prevail upon’ children morally. In particular, he was concerned about the responsibility to regulate, cultivate or moderate children’s feelings. All these concepts have a causal implication, which we will examine more closely when we look at the enhancement agenda in a policy context.

Whatever word we use, the basic idea is that adults should try to ‘cause’ children to have some feelings rather than others. The first concern above was that what is right in

one context might be wrong in another; and this no-one need deny. The Aristotelian position is expressed in this well-known passage:

...fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. (NE: 1106b19)

This passage employs the distinctive Aristotelian concept of rightness. Aristotle does not say, as some do: it is never right for children to experience anger or agitation. He says that there is a right time and a wrong time for these emotions, depending on the context. In this regard, he was opposed to philosophers like Seneca the Stoic, who thought that anger and agitation are always indicators of moral weakness.

However, Aristotle was conspicuously silent on the general question of which emotions should be experienced when. He believed that adults should regulate the feelings of children ‘appropriately’, rather than according to a rule book. This raises the question of how we know which feelings are appropriate and inappropriate, and Aristotle’s answer is considered by many unsatisfactory. We should aim, he said, for the mean, that is, for what is “intermediate and best”. We know what this is by exercising good judgement about the basic needs and interests—the ‘flourishing’—of the child. Whether Sally feels too fearful or too confident as she approaches her maths GCSE exam depends on what is best for Sally as an individual. If she is a timid child, a confidence-boost may do her good. If she is arrogant and conceited, it may be appropriate to instil a little fear.

For Aristotle there are objectively right and wrong ways to feel in particular circumstances, but no general account (nor is a general account possible in principle) of what these are. On the one hand this is unsatisfactory; on the other, one may argue, it reflects the true relationship between language, value and reality. That there are *real values*—i.e. objectively better and worse ways to feel in particular circumstances—is compatible with the impossibility of specifying in a general way what these are.

If this is correct, an enhancement agenda had better face up to the fact. It implies that the regulation of emotions belongs first and foremost in intimate contexts, like the

classroom and home, in which adults know and care about children and try to make sound judgements about their interests. This perspective on the matter addresses the second concern above: that enhancement means manipulation and intrusion. The difference between enhancing a child's feelings of hope or confidence and enhancing the colour saturation on a screen is that the first has a crucial moral reference whereas latter has none. There is and must be a normative dimension to enhancement: otherwise we are right to have serious concerns. What this means in practice is that we *hope* that teachers and parents will 'prevail upon' children in ways that are, if not wise, at least benign. We *hope* that they have children's interests at heart, and make sound judgements about what these are. This has implications for teacher selection and training, but it marks (regrettably, in some ways) the end of the road for philosophy. Aristotle's insight was that philosophy, or indeed any *general* discourse, takes us only a certain way towards the situations and happenings of everyday life. This sounds a cautionary note not only for philosophers, but also for policy-makers.

In the next section, I shall examine the policy perspective on enhancement, but first I want to bring out a dimension of emotion-regulation that can easily go missing. This is the cognitive dimension. We have seen that emotions have varying levels of intensity, and this is why we can talk about enhancing them rather as we talk about enhancing colour. It seems a small step from here to the thought that emotions are non-cognitive states, and indeed the term 'non-cognitive' is peppered confusingly throughout many policy documents in relation to the concept of enhancement. However emotions are both non-cognitive *and* cognitive, for they crucially involve thoughts, beliefs and judgements in addition to levels of intensity. The emotion of anger, for example, in addition to a feeling of pain, involves a belief about having been slighted or wronged. The regulation of anger, in this respect, is not at all like the regulation of colour saturation, for in some circumstances it can be tempered or eliminated simply by showing a person that she made a mistake. What she thought was a slight was no such thing. In short, she misunderstood the situation, and when she understands it properly her anger should fade. Her new understanding and the ebbing pain should (if she is rational) be one. Certain beliefs or judgements simply *are* pleasurable or painful, and this is what it means to have an emotional life.

This point has important implications for an enhancement agenda. I said that there is and must be a normative dimension to enhancement if we are to allay concerns about manipulation. The cognitive dimension of emotion means that, in our regulation of other people's emotions, we are or should be concerned about their interest in *understanding* themselves and the situations they are in. If we simply wanted to 'tone down' an angry person's pain, we might tell a lie, assuming the person has been grievously wronged. However we cannot, and normally do not, systematically ignore considerations of understanding and truth when we seek to enhance or inhibit people's feelings. We believe that people have an *interest* in understanding the situations they are in, even though this can sometimes conflict with their interest in not experiencing too much pain. It would be an unprincipled adult who tried indiscriminately to enhance children's pleasure, irrespective of the extent to which they understood themselves or the situations they were in.

This brings me to the policy agenda. The project of enhancing children's self-esteem often sounds like a project that has drawn a firm line between cognitive and so-called non-cognitive skills. It suggests that the tendency to feel good about oneself should be promoted independently of the *truth* about one's virtues, efforts or achievements. It siphons off understanding and insight—the cognitive aspects of emotion—in favour of heightened positive feelings. In some respects, this is not unreasonable. I have argued that childhood is a time during which feelings about one's worth develop through attachments to adults, and these can have lifelong importance (Cigman 2004). There is nothing original about this idea, which I called 'basic self-esteem', and which is derived from Freud's theory of narcissism. However, reality needs to set in, and children need to develop an ability to discriminate between true and false claims about themselves, and to experience, without being crushed by, pain.

The policy agenda plucks the idea of regulating children's feelings from the realm of individual encounters, and sets it down—apparently unaltered—in the realm of public policy. It is not unaltered, however, for the concerns are different and the pressure on key concepts has changed. The policy concerns include 'system reform' and lists of goals on the strength of which political careers will stand or fall. There are 'high ambitions for children's trusts to deliver measurable improvements for all children and

young people’, and there is guidance for schools on their ‘duty to promote well-being’. There are ‘promises’ to schools that they will be assessed on the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of this duty, rather than simply on the basis of attainment. The focus is strongly on ‘measurable outcomes’, for there is no point (it would seem) in trying to enhance social and emotional skills nationally if one cannot determine objectively whether, and to what extent, one has succeeded.

All this takes us a million miles from the home or classroom. On an Aristotelian view, what need to be regulated are our familiar friends, the emotions. On the policy view, what need to be enhanced are things that we find much harder to grasp, like well-being and social and emotional skills. The need to measure these amounts to an inducement to exaggerate the non-cognitive dimensions of enhancement at the expense of the cognitive dimensions, with a serious cost to the integrity of the agenda. We now need to look into this further.

3. The enhancement agenda in educational policy

The enhancement agenda has several requirements. It needs to identify ‘something’ that is believed to support and improve learning. It needs to show that this ‘something’ does in fact support and improve learning. It needs to measure this ‘something’, and then enhance it. Finally, it needs to prove that this ‘something’ has in fact been enhanced, through further measuring.

An initial difficulty is that the commitment to measurable outcomes means that the *nature* of what is being enhanced is not the first priority. The first priority is to measure *something* which can be correlated with behavioural and other variables. Although Emler says that test scores should ‘behave in a manner that is consistent with what is known or believed to be the nature of the phenomenon’ (2001, p. 9), he does not treat this as a crucial aspect of the investigation. His relative indifference to the ‘nature of the phenomenon’ is echoed in the social science literature, and I shall express this by saying that the enhancement agenda is committed to measuring quality Q, without necessarily knowing what Q is.

Ignorance about the nature of Q is evident in many ways. Emler admits:

Knowing that one has measured something with a reasonable degree of accuracy is not the same as knowing *what* one has measured or whether it is what one intended to measure... Despite imperfect agreement about its nature, levels of self-esteem can be reliably and easily measured.

So on the one hand, test scores should be ‘consistent with what is known or believed to be the nature of the phenomenon’, and on the other, we have ‘imperfect agreement about [self-esteem’s] nature.’ This is deeply puzzling. Imagine someone saying: I have measured *something*, but I’m not sure whether it is heat, weight, height or light. To measure something is to claim to *know* something rather precise about that thing, and it is hard to see how one can do this without knowing what ‘it’ is. One may not understand the physical properties of heat, but measuring the temperature of something means at least knowing that one is measuring heat rather than weight. We can imagine a child who gets this wrong. She has learned to use a thermometer in the sense that she can get a correct reading, without understanding that the highest reading has something to do with the painful sensation of being burnt. She needs to know this. For a measurement to be meaningful, it must yield precise knowledge, not only of a numerical value but of the ‘nature of the thing’ that is measured.

Not only is the nature of Q (or, for Emler, self-esteem) problematic. The nature of measurement is equally so. Emler (2001) writes:

It is good practice in psychological measurement to demonstrate that one can obtain similar results using different methods of measurement. With respect to self-esteem, this has yet to be demonstrated. But this should not discourage us from looking for patterns of evidence within the methods of measurement that are available. (p. 12)

This sounds to me like an admission that self-esteem measurement is not ‘good practice’, but my more fundamental concern is that it is not even measurement. Wittgenstein (1953) has a telling comment about what it means to measure something:

Imagine someone saying: “But I know how tall I am!” and laying his hand on top of his head to prove it. (para. 279)

This remark is funny (philosophical humour was a serious business for Wittgenstein) precisely because a knowledge claim is being made that cannot be tested in any shape or

form. I do not ‘know’ how tall I am when I place my hand on top of my head, because I have done nothing to suggest that I have measured the spatial dimension that we call ‘height’. I am (perhaps) going through *some* of the routine of measuring height, but I am crucially missing out the rest. What I am missing is the possibility of alternative yardsticks (I am not only taller as measured by a slide-rule, but my clothes are too small, my bed is too short...) and this is a non-optional dimension of what Wittgenstein would have called the language game of measurement.

The enhancement agenda has two clear aims. These are the aims of (a) measuring and (b) raising or enhancing *something*. More cynically, I would say that the aims of the agenda are to produce the *appearance* of doing these things. One cannot appear to raise something in a way that will satisfy a sceptical electorate without appearing to measure that thing. And one cannot appear to measure something without appearing to do this with precision, for the concept of precision is embodied in the concept of measurement. What is required, therefore, is an instrument of measurement that commands general approval and assent.

Self-esteem questionnaires are the instrument of choice, and it must be said that they are widely accepted. They assign numerical values to ticks in boxes, and what policy-makers want almost more than anything else is to get children to tick higher-scoring boxes. I say: they *almost* want this. It satisfies one of their goals, which is to improve ‘measurable outcomes’. However there are armies of researchers who are not necessarily friends of the government, ready to expose a flaw in this process. This is what Nicholas Emler did. He claimed to show that the high self-esteem which we had assumed was the key to a teenager’s sunny future was nothing of the kind. On the contrary, high self-esteem is a risk factor for drug and alcohol abuse, racism, child abuse and an assortment of other ills. Conversely the low self-esteem that we had blamed for society’s ills had little if nothing to answer for, for ‘the evidence was about as clear as it could be’ in ruling out a causal connection between low self-esteem and crime, racism and so on.

Emler’s study changed the landscape of self-esteem research, and I shall look at it more closely in the following section. In particular, I shall be concerned about the use of self-esteem questionnaires as instruments of measurement. One consequence of the study

was that it led to some careful re-marketing. Well-being and social and emotional skills overtook their discredited cousin, self-esteem, in the public domain. Except that the *ideas* refused to go away. What we had was still a policy agenda with a bent towards measurable outcomes, and assumptions about ‘something’ that would cure social ills. We still had little if any idea what this ‘something’ was, and some of us had a nagging suspicion that low self-esteem had been let off too lightly. The recent debate reflects a more sophisticated view of the alleged trajectory from low to high self-esteem. Emler’s discovery that high self-esteem causes drug and alcohol abuse, racism, child abuse and so on reminded us of those famous megalomaniacs whose unalloyed approval of themselves led to horrific atrocities. Psychologist Roy Baumeister et al (2003) called high self-esteem a ‘heterogeneous category’, observing that it encompasses ‘people who frankly accept their good qualities along with narcissistic, defensive and conceited individuals’. Several philosophers, including myself, have written about the excessive or *too-high* self-esteem that presents as bravado, arrogance, big-headedness (Cigman 2004).

So what did Emler’s study show? It is important to see that the thrust of his research was negative: he set out to demonstrate the *absence* of a causal link between low self-esteem and under-achievement, disaffection and violence, contrary to popular assumptions about, and public investment in, such a link. Despite his acknowledgement that it is harder to disprove than prove causal linkages, he claimed success in this ambition. But was he successful? Did he really overturn a ‘popular view’? In the next section, I try to answer this question.

4. Self-esteem: the popular view

Emler introduces his study with a short quotation:

Violent children hold other lives cheap because they believe their own lives to be worthless (Melanie Phillips, quoted Emler, 2001, p. 1).

This, he says, will strike a chord with readers because it ‘mirrors many widely accepted views’. He is right: many people agree with this, and would add that they see under-achieving children, teenage mothers, criminals, drug addicts as in this position because they ‘believe their own lives to be worthless’.

This is an explanatory theory. It says that people who manifest certain sorts of behaviour do so because they have low self-esteem. 'Because' in this context signals a necessary condition; if you are violent or under-achieving, you *must* have a self-esteem problem. People who believe this often believe that it works in the other direction too. If you have low self-esteem (they think) you will inevitably (or almost inevitably) become a violent person, a person who does badly at school, a girl who gets pregnant at fifteen. This is a predictive theory, and it merges with the explanatory theory in the view that low self-esteem is *necessary and sufficient* for educational failure and anti-social behaviour.

These ideas are simplistic and implausible. There *are* no necessary or sufficient conditions for anti-social behaviour or educational failure, though journalists, self-help therapists and positive psychologists would like to think there are. At most, there are loose causal connections, though it is exceedingly hard to specify what these are, especially if self-esteem or Q are poorly understood. It would be wrong, in my view, to equate the explanatory/ predictive theory with the 'everyday' understanding of self-esteem in a more functional sense. The former is the absurd social vaccine view: inject a population with Q or self-esteem or whatever it is, and we all become happier, safer and more productive overnight. Teachers and parents who worry about the self-esteem of the children in their care do not think this way; yet their concerns may have features in common with the explanatory/ predictive theory in the sense that they *worry* about the educational futures of children with low self-esteem, and *look beyond* the bravado of disruptive or violent children to see if they are covering a sense of low self-worth.

The explanatory/ predictive theory is in essence the self-help conception of self-esteem. According to this conception, we may not know what self-esteem is, but we know that it needs to be enhanced in as many individuals as possible because it is the source of, and prerequisite for, all things good. The challenge for anyone who is looking for a serious conception of self-esteem is to distinguish between this vapid, implausible idea and the ordinary, functional view of teachers and parents in the classroom and the home. This Emler conspicuously fails to do. Having quoted Phillips disparagingly, he goes on:

[Phillips'] observation will have struck a chord with many readers because it mirrors many widely accepted views. These include the ideas that many children,

rather too many, are now growing up with a sense that they have no value, and that their damaged sense of their own worth in turn causes them to do violence to themselves and others (p. 1).

Here Phillips' claim is linked to the ideas: (1) that many children are growing up with low self-esteem, and (2) that this causes them to be violent (one could add: to under-achieve). It seems to me quite wrong to conflate (1) and (2), as Emler does, with Phillips' claim that all violent children believe their lives to be worthless. The latter is indeed speculative hype. (1), on the other hand, far from being hype, is almost certainly true. Of course its truth needs to be confirmed (although the term 'many' is so vague that it could hardly be false), and this can only be done if we establish that we all mean the same thing by the 'low self-esteem' and agree about the methods by which its presence in greater and lesser (but not necessarily measurable) quantities and absence are assessed. But as a simple claim, based on ordinary observations to the effect that *this* child has low self-esteem, and *these* children and *those* children, it is surely sensible enough to take seriously. (2) is less convincing, because it has the ring of a sufficient condition: if C has low-self-esteem, she *will be* violent (will under-achieve). On the other hand, I would suggest that many parents and teachers are justified in being concerned that *particular* children with low self-esteem may under-achieve or behave disruptively or violently *as a consequence* of their low self-esteem. They would need good reasons for thinking this about the children in question, rather than a causal hypothesis about self-esteem and its effects, but I see no reason in principle why such reasons should not exist. On the contrary, the idea that Mary or Joe, who are always saying 'I'm stupid' or 'I'm hopeless' in class, might *as a consequence of their feelings* under-achieve, seems like a perfectly reasonable one.

Discussing the analysis of difficult concepts like self-esteem, philosopher Kristjan Kristjánsson (2007) writes:

Sometimes, as in the case of self-esteem, a clearly specified meaning may even be missing in ordinary language (it is not as though we could go into the field and ask the real self-esteem to please stand up); and in such cases, more radical conceptual regimentation may be required.

I disagree. I believe that we can and should ask the real self-esteem to please stand up, just as we ask the real knowledge, the real justice or the real beauty to stand up when, as philosophers, we enquire into the ‘real’ uses and purposes of such words, as opposed to their corruptions in various theoretical contexts. The concept of self-esteem is what we are concerned about when we notice that Mary or Joe is always putting her/himself down, and worry about how this will affect her/his future. Self-esteem is an ethical concept, bound up with the notions of ‘too little’ and ‘too much’, and these crucially refer us to an individual’s flourishing. Despite being hugely influential, Emler’s work misses all this, because it is locked into precisely the conceptual framework that it purports to overturn. He concludes that, not *low* self-esteem but *high* self-esteem is causally linked to alcohol and drug abuse, and risky sexual behaviour. Moreover low self-esteem, *like* high self-esteem, has no effect on educational achievement. The conclusions are different from those of the self-helpers, but the basic assumptions are the same. It is assumed that self-esteem is incorrigibly known by self-report, so the absence of yardsticks by which to test these is not a serious difficulty. It is assumed that the motives for filling in self-esteem questionnaires are transparent, so when a person ticks a box that says ‘strongly agree’ alongside the statement ‘I feel I have a number of good qualities’, this means that she feels she has a number of good qualities, end of story. It is assumed that ‘more’ self-esteem can be quantitatively distinguished from ‘less’ self-esteem, and that this can be done meaningfully without asking: how truthful are these feelings? However, these are only assumptions, products of thinking. We now need to go into the field.

5. Will the real self-esteem please stand up?

What *concerns* does the preoccupation with self-esteem try to address? I see this as the fundamental question.

This is different from the questions raised by most researchers in this area. The usual starting point is a brief discussion about the meaning or definition of self-esteem in which the key question is whether this is a set of feelings or a set of beliefs, attitudes, judgements. *Why* one answer or another is preferred (given that, as I argue, self-esteem involves them all) is never entirely clear. To elect for one or another definition is not to

do what I have been arguing needs to be done, which is enquire about the *nature* of self-esteem and the concerns that brought this concept to our attention in the first place.

The most popular definition is that of psychologist William James, who says that self-esteem is the ratio of people's successes to their pretensions or aspirations. For James, the basic question we need to ask when enquiring into a person's self-esteem is: to what extent do you see yourself as having met your own standards and aspirations? The many questionnaires that have been devised to measure self-esteem depart from this basic idea. But here is a difficulty. The easiest way to meet one's standards and aspirations is to have none at all. The child who feels so bad about herself that she feels unworthy to aspire to anything may have the highest ratio of successes to aspirations, i.e. in *this* sense, a very high level of self-esteem. However, part of what people are concerned about when they are concerned about self-esteem is precisely the inability, failure or reluctance to aspire *because one feels unworthy to aspire*. This idea—that in order to flourish, human beings need to feel 'worthy to aspire'—is, I would argue, a crucial component of our ordinary concern about self-esteem.

A good way to explore this is through a fictional character. In good fiction, thought, beliefs, motives and actions are integral and highly transparent. Assuming that the author is doing her job well, our role as readers is not to be sceptical (imagine someone saying, no, it didn't really happen that way), but to be, as Henry James put it, 'finely aware and richly responsible' (quoted by Nussbaum, 1990). There is no place for doubt, as such; there is only a place for obtuseness, that is, for a failure to see, feel, be 'finely aware'. This is a great advantage in a discussion like this. I can question the motives of children who tick boxes in one way or another, and even if I know the children well, this question may remain unresolved. I cannot question the motives of a fictional character in the same way, for such motives are (assuming that the fiction is good) *there* for me to find or fail to find in the text. Novels create windows into human hearts and minds which may be interpreted differently, but cannot be in an ordinary sense opaque or hidden from view.

The novel I shall look at is *Untouchable*, by Mulk Raj Anand, and the main character is a young man called Bakha. Bakha is not only an 'untouchable', i.e. an outcaste from Hindu society. He is a sweeper, which means that his role in life is to

clear away other people's excrement, and he belongs to the bottom rung of the untouchable group socially. His status compels him to shout warnings of his approach as he walks on the streets, so he can be avoided by people who believe they will be defiled by touching him. Bakha has few aspirations. The author tells us:

He had begun to work at the latrines at the age of six and resigned himself to the hereditary life of the craft...

He knows his place in society, and frankly accepts his extremely low status. On one occasion he is walking along a street, and a Hindu man touches him accidentally. He starts hurling abuse at Bakha, calling him a 'low caste vermin' and complaining that he will have to take a bath to purify himself. This is Bakha's response:

Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralyzed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear and humility and servility. He was used to being spoken to roughly. But he had seldom been taken so unawares. The curious smile of humility which always hovered on his lips in the presence of high-caste men now became more pronounced. He lifted his face to the man opposite him, though his eyes were bent down. Then he shot a hurried glance at the man. The fellow's eyes were flaming and red-hot (p. 46).

Bakha cannot read, but if he were somehow able to fill in a self-esteem questionnaire, we would not expect a high result. In particular, we would expect him to 'strongly disagree' with the statement on the well-known Rosenberg self-esteem scale: 'I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.'

However, Bakha is a human being, and the picture is more complex than this. The idea of placing him on a trajectory from low to high self-esteem—i.e. of *measuring* his self-esteem—begins to look absurd when we consider aspects of his life and personality. We are told that, though Bakha had 'resigned himself to the hereditary life of the craft', he could not 'consciously accept' the fact that he was a sweeper, and indeed 'dreamed of becoming a sahib'. He was resigned to a bleak existence, but felt worthy of a great deal more.

Shortly after his self-deprecating response to the bullying Hindu, he is walking along the street, and there develops:

...a smouldering rage in his soul. His feelings would rise like spurts of smoke from a half-smothered fire, in fitful, unbalanced jerks when the recollection of some abuse or rebuke he had suffered kindled a spark in the ashes of remorse inside him. ...‘Why was all this fuss? Why was I so humble? I could have struck him!’

The reader is relieved. Thank goodness, one thinks; Bakha has some pride. He was *appropriately* enraged by a terrible insult, and we see this, together with the fact that Bakha could not ‘consciously accept’ that he was a sweeper, as evidence that he has a modicum of self-esteem after all.

This impression is strengthened by another brief incident. One day Bakha has the bright idea of asking a higher caste child to teach him to read, and he cleverly bribes both the boy and his younger brother to give him lessons. He needs to do this in order to prevent the younger child from feeling jealous and ratting on the older child to their mother; if she were to find out, that would be the end of lessons. The deal is done and Bakha feels elated. The author tells us that he:

... headed towards the gates of the town, his basket under one arm, his broom under another, and in his heart a song as happy as a lark’s.

There is, in my view, much to be learned from this story. First, the story calls into question the idea that self-esteem and similar questionnaires are (as IQ tests were once wrongly thought to be) culture-independent. On the improbable supposition that an individual like Bakha would complete such a questionnaire, we cannot ignore the way his responses would reflect how he has been taught to think and talk about himself by people he has been conditioned to see as in every way superior. According to the picture we have of Bakha, the idea about talking well about himself in the company of literate people would be unthinkable.

However the author of *Untouchable* encourages his readers to experience a tension between the ‘official’ sense of low self-worth that would no doubt manifest on a self-esteem test, and something that is equally if not more important. Bakha’s eventual anger towards the Hindu bully, his sense of pride as he refuses to ‘consciously accept’ that he is a sweeper, and his confidence and joy in the face of an educational opportunity: these are crucial indicators of *good* self-esteem, and they make the book a richly

rewarding, rather than an agonizing and in some sense pointless read. We know that people can be crushed by abuse and denigration. Far more interesting are the ways in which they can be both crushed and uncrushable: both succumb to and rise above misfortune.

I do not believe most teachers would have concerns about Bakha, were he miraculously to walk into their classrooms. Yes, he might grovel and fawn for a while, but the crucial thing is that he would learn. He would quickly learn to read (we are led to suppose), and one expects him to learn to look people in the eye, to stand tall if they bully him, and much else besides. Bakha seems *capable* of learning all this because he has what we see in an everyday sense as ‘good’ self-esteem. What this means, to repeat, is that he has ‘appropriate’ emotional tendencies. He feels pride and anger rather than shame when bullied, and confidence and joy rather than fear at the prospect of learning.

Consider another child called Emily. Emily makes a cameo but unforgettable appearance in John Holt’s 1964 classic *How children fail*. We do not know her age, but she is old enough to be expected to spell, or learn to spell, the word ‘microscope’. Emily fails to do this in a test. She bizarrely writes MINCOPERT, which indicates not only that she cannot spell ‘microscope’, but that she cannot properly *attempt* to spell this word. As Holt puts it:

She obviously made a wild grab at the answer, and having written it down, never looked at it, never checked to see if it looked right. I see a lot of this one-way, don’t-look-back-it’s-too-awful strategy among students (1964, pp. 19 – 20).

It does not seem to have occurred to Holt, as it would occur to most of us nowadays, that Emily might belong to the group of individuals that are known as ‘dyslexic’. The readiness to label children this way belongs to an area of controversy that I do not want to engage with here. (Section II of this book—Julian Elliott’s and Simon Gibbs’ chapter in particular—is devoted to this fascinating topic.) I am interested in the strategy that Holt vividly describes as ‘don’t-look-back-it’s-too-awful’, suggesting that it is employed by children who are *too* afraid of learning, *too* ashamed of their performances. I am not suggesting that it is appropriate for children to feel fear or shame in the context of learning, so long as it is not ‘too much’, as I hope I have made clear. The point is that some children experience these emotions in an extreme and debilitating excess. Such

children, I believe, are encountered not infrequently in the classroom, and the expression 'low self-esteem' naturally arises in this connection.

We do not know, obviously, how Emily would fare on a self-esteem test, but I see no reason to assume that a child who tackles a spelling challenge this way would necessarily disagree with a statement like 'I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others'. Perhaps she is attractive and has a lot of friends; perhaps her looks and popularity enable her to present in many situations as a person with good self-esteem. However I suggest that this performance in a spelling test calls into question her self-esteem, in an important and widely accepted use of that term. Emily didn't merely fail to meet a standard; she demonstrated (at that moment, at least) that she lacked the emotional resources to remedy that failure. She ducked rather than faced the challenge. If she were to adopt the 'don't-look-back-it's-too-awful strategy' in her education generally, she would no doubt fail at many things and be in danger of developing a sense of 'unworthiness to aspire'.

The child who cannot or will not make an effort to learn is of great educational concern, and it is this, I believe, that the enhancement agenda sets out to address. The Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme says that it:

will be used by schools who have identified the social and emotional aspects of learning as a key focus for their work with the children. These will be schools who know that the *factors holding back learning* in their setting include children's difficulties in understanding and managing their feelings, working co-operatively in groups, motivating themselves and demonstrating resilience in the face of setbacks (my italics).

The enhancement agenda is about certain 'factors holding back learning'. These are not physical, cognitive, social or cultural, but emotional. We all know that such factors exist and can be hard to overcome. What we have not succeeded in doing is understanding their nature, though expressions like 'low self-esteem', 'poor social and emotional skills', 'poor motivation' and 'poor resilience' hint at this. I would now like to venture a more detailed suggestion about the 'nature of the phenomenon' that these terms attempt to capture.

Emily, I suspect, is caught in a trap. *First*, she fails, and the ‘don’t-look-back-it’s-too-awful strategy’ used on the spelling test suggests that she may have a habit of failing. Let us assume for the sake of argument that Emily fails often. As regular occurrences in a person’s life, failures tend to lead to a sense of worthlessness, as least in the competitive environments of schools. This is not an empirical generalisation, but a comment on the expectations that are generated by our society. *Second*, as a ‘worthless person’ in this sense, Emily is repeatedly confronted by educational challenges. (She is a schoolchild, and schoolchildren face constant challenges.) Emily has failed in the past—she has learnt to see herself as ineffective in the face of challenges—*therefore*, she expects to fail in the future. The ‘don’t-look-back-it’s-too-awful strategy’ expresses a sense of the inevitability of failure, given repeated failures of the past.

This, I submit, is the circular logic of failure, though the negative sequence of thinking is not inevitable, and indeed the aim of the enhancement agenda as I understand it is precisely to interrupt or overturn it. The circular thought is this: I am worthless because/therefore I fail. *Because* I have failed to achieve certain standards, *therefore* I will do so in the future. The educator’s priority must be to stop such thinking in its tracks, and notions like resilience, persistence, motivation etc present themselves as possible ways to do this. *We must make children more motivated, more resilient...* The concept of self-esteem plays a crucial role here. There is a curious debate amongst philosophers about whether self-esteem has a motivational aspect; we have seen that some, like William James, see self-esteem as essentially backward-looking, a matter of rating one’s achievements relative to one’s aspirations. Kristjan Kristjansson argues in this vein that self-esteem is conceptually independent of confidence, which is forward-looking. This misses the vital point that our *concern* about self-esteem is a concern about creatures which live inescapably in time, and are *integrally* backward-looking and forward-looking. The circular logic of failure, as I described it, is low self-esteem on a temporal stage, in which negative self-appraisals feed into, and in some cases tragically undermine, executive, forward-looking behaviour. We do not want this for children, and the recent intense interest in enhancement obscurely acknowledges this fact.

6. Conclusion

The enhancement agenda in education involves multiple errors. It has based around a property to which a variety of terms have been appended; I called it simply Q. It is assumed that Q is rather like blood pressure, quantifiably higher or lower. It is supposed that Q belongs on a moral trajectory, where ‘more’ is always better than ‘less’. Finally, it is supposed that Q is reliably measured by ‘tick behaviour’, as though it has never occurred to anyone to attribute ambivalent or complex motives to human actions.

Some useful work has borne in on these fictions. Baumeister’s observation that high self-esteem is a ‘heterogeneous category’ has aroused suspicions about the idea of the moral trajectory. However the criticisms have not in my view gone far enough, for the interest in measurable outcomes persists. There is still a tendency to attribute self-esteem or well-being ‘quotients’ to entire populations, so that educators can get to work on boosting these and news can hopefully be broken that they have risen. However, the *real* concept of self-esteem has nothing to do with quotients; indeed, I would say that it has a fairly limited application. The ‘real concept’ expresses a concern about individuals who experience certain inappropriate emotions and get trapped in the circular logic of failure. Of course, the emotions and the logic are inextricable; the latter involves a tendency to experience too much fear and shame, too little confidence and joy.

There is a great deal of talk nowadays about ‘barriers to learning’, particularly for children who are seen as having difficulties and disabilities. I have argued that low self-esteem can be a significant barrier to learning, though human beings are (as I have said several times) sufficiently complex that it would be wrong to see this as a sufficient condition for educational failure. Some children succeed precisely *because* they feel bad about themselves; they work hard (sometimes obsessively) to overturn this view of themselves. Others, however, need help, and this should come in the form, first, of acknowledgement of the problem; second, of identification of particular children who suffer from the problem; third, of empirical work—particularly, I would think, by teachers—on the question: how can children be helped to escape from the circular logic of failure? This is a question on which philosophers and empirical researchers can usefully converge, for it is about our ability to ‘prevail upon’ other people’s wills to aspire towards a better kind of life.

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