The Truth About Self-Esteem (*)
In one sixth-grade classroom, students were being led through a self-esteem exercise in which they were to reflect on their feelings of being good enough. At the end of the exercise, the teacher asked the students to write down their feelings about the experience, and one student wrote, "I hate how I feel when I think about myself." The teacher, noticing the student's negative response, pulled her aside and asked if she had any questions. The student replied, "I'm not good enough." The teacher gently reassured her, "You are good enough. Everyone has their own set of challenges and everyone is good enough." The student seemed relieved and went back to the classroom, continuing the exercise with a more positive attitude.

While psychologists have been interested for decades in the way individuals think and feel about themselves, the most recent research has focused on the role of self-esteem in academic achievement. In California, a task force was commissioned to study the issue, and in addition to issuing its own report, the task force also commissioned a group of scholars. The scholars found that self-esteem programs do not have a measurable impact on academic achievement.

There is no question but that many of the researchers who contributed to this volume earnestly hoped to prove exactly the opposite. As the sociologist Neil Smelser conceded in his introduction to the book, "Our colleagues have come up virtually empty-handed."

The answer, once again, depends on our objectives. If we are genuinely concerned with students' intellectual development, we need a complete curriculum that includes facts and skills in primary subject areas. If we are concerned with their performance, we can enhance it by what Alfie Kohn has elsewhere called the "three C's of motivation": challenge, choice, and collaboration. A curriculum that spontaneously embeds these elements is not self-contained, but it is no less self-contained than a curriculum that omits them.

The fundamental challenge is to learn more about how and why things work. This is what classrooms are for. We cannot learn more without more classrooms.