

Our Educational Ambivalence

America's schools must be doing at least a few things right. After all, despite their well-publicized shortcomings, the United States is—for the moment, at least—the undisputed economic and cultural champion of the world. There are many other explanations for this success, such as the American openness to immigrant talent and an economic system that gives generous scope to the ambition of individuals. But surely our educational system has something to do with it.

It's not difficult to pinpoint some of the system's strengths. Higher education in this country, for all its flaws, is the envy of the world. We make up for a lot of lost intellectual ground when the kids go off to college, and especially when they enter graduate school for more specialized training. Nothing seems to concentrate the American mind like the need to pay the rent. If international test comparisons are to be believed, moreover, the American system also performs relatively well in the earliest years of education, up to junior high school. But then relative performance begins to slip, and by graduation day American kids are clinging to some of the lower rungs of the international ladder. (See the chart on page 47.)

What happens in those middle years—the last years of formal education for many students—is one of the great mysteries of American education. The stacks of educational research produced over the last couple of decades yield little enlightenment. Experts tend to change the subject when queried. I suspect that one reason for this silence is that many of the answers lead straight to the “soft” realm of culture and values.

We missed one opportunity for a national discussion of educational values some years ago when controversy exploded around a study showing that black students were hampered by a cultural prejudice of their peers: doing well was seen as “acting white.” It was an important discovery, but what wasn't much

examined in the ensuing controversy was the assumption that whites themselves “act white.” The truth is that Americans of all kinds are deeply ambivalent about academic achievement.

One source of mixed emotions is American egalitarianism and its noxious sibling, the spirit of conformity. Over the past summer, I watched some overachieving suburban parents worry (along with my wife and me) over whether to send their children to an enriched public school program. Beneath the prudent questions—would the additional challenges be good for the child?—there was a strong and unexpected undercurrent of another sort, a worry that committing the children so completely to academic pursuits might deprive them of a “normal” childhood. By junior and

senior high school, the forces of “normalcy” are cresting inside the schools, pushed along by those two great forces for adolescent conformity, hormones and popular culture. High achievers still

tend to earn as much ignominy as honor.

More educational ambivalence grows out of our cultural decision to value schooling almost solely in economic terms, reducing the intrinsic rewards of learning to a mere afterthought. If the purpose of an education is to get a good job, schooling itself becomes a job, or very like one. There's merit in this approach, yet in the back of their minds many parents also want to spare their children this introduction to the rat race. They watch with a certain dismay as the homework piles higher with every new school year and the academic stresses weigh ever heavier. Perhaps they decide not to insist on that extra hour with the books—there will be time enough for all that later in life, they think.

These forms of educational ambivalence are deeply rooted in soil far from the classroom door. They ought to serve as reminders that the improvement of American education cannot end with the renovation of the schoolhouse.

—Steven Lagerfeld

WQ