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So, You Mean I'm *Not* Really Good at Math?

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The Brookings Institution released a report yesterday on an interesting phenomenon that has appeared in recent years. American students do comparatively poorly in math compared to students of other nations — but they feel really good about themselves anyway. As a matter of fact, they *think* they are really good at math.

As Jay Mathews of The Washington Post reports, “countries such as the United States that embrace self-esteem, joy and real-world relevance in learning mathematics are lagging behind others that don’t promote all that self-regard.”

More:

According to the Washington think tank’s annual Brown Center report on education, 6 percent of Korean eighth-graders surveyed expressed confidence in their math skills, compared with 39 percent of U.S. eighth-graders. But a respected international math assessment showed Koreans scoring far ahead of their peers in the United States, raising questions about the importance of self-esteem.

In Japan, the report found, 14 percent of math teachers surveyed said they aim to connect lessons to students’ lives, compared with 66 percent of U.S. math teachers. Yet the U.S. scores in eighth-grade math trail those of the Japanese, raising similar questions about the importance of practical relevance.

Tom Loveless, the report’s author, said that the findings do not mean that student happiness causes low achievement. But he wrote that his analysis of the international math assessment, the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, shows that U.S. schools should not be too quick to assume that happiness is what matters in the classroom.

What a revolutionary thought — maybe happiness is *not* what matters most in the classroom?

At USA Today, Greg Toppo reported, “The more kids like math and say they do well in it, the less likely they are to do well.”

More:

The happiness factor plays a minimal role in math achievement for millions of children, says study author Tom Loveless, who calls the difference in scores “huge” between the happiest and unhappiest nations.

The data suggest simply making math relevant and enjoyable isn’t enough, he says. “If we want the United States to be high-achieving and among the world’s best nations, obviously we have to do something beyond that.”

In the text of the report, Loveless remarks:

Educational progressives made happiness a central theme of the “child-centered” practices advocated in the early twentieth century. Boredom was targeted as particularly evil. Reformers argued that subject matter should correspond to

students' interests, not to ancient disciplinary standards or intellectual merits. Book learning, subject matter knowledge, and learning for learning's sake were eschewed in deference to activity-based learning, learning "how to learn," and learning for self-awareness and personal growth. These principles remain paramount among many school reformers today. When Bill Gates tours the "no books, no lectures" school with Oprah Winfrey and declares that projects are "the way to go," he is echoing the sentiments of one of the earliest advocates of progressive education, William Heard Kilpatrick, whose essay, "The Project Method," was published in 1918.

Happiness is a great gift, but it should be grounded in reality — not in the false culture of self-esteem that substitutes good feelings for achievement. Self-regard is not substitute for actually knowing math.

If nothing else, this study demonstrates that American 8th graders — like all other sinners — are capable of incredible self-deception. The self-esteem movement just makes that lie all the more attractive.

SOURCE: Tom Loveless, *How Well Are Students Learning?*, The Brookings Institution, Brown Center on Education Policy, October 2006.

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