

Dumbing Down to Safeguard Self-Esteem: A Disastrous Strategy for a Non-Existent Problem

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As part of prep for a book project, I've been reading some classics. One of those was Charles Silberman's 1971 *Crisis in the Classroom*. A general takeaway is WOW; a lot of things are still almost exactly the way they were then. Silberman provides scathing criticism of the public school system, including disappointment after disappointment with reform movements. What they all had in common was that new information – studies indicating what the public school system authorities and teachers *should* do – alone was expected to bring about a change in education system policy and educator behavior; also that innovation had to work through the public school system for everyone to not eventually be dismissed as another failed fad. We still haven't learned – not enough of us have – that people on the inside of broken systems will rarely, if ever, be capable of fixing them.

A shorter point worth digesting is that we created a lot of academic wreckage by dumbing down to make sure we didn't hurt students' self-esteem; the current system's approach to leaving no child left behind. A particularly sad part of the whole story is that, on the whole, there was no fragile self-esteem problem to address. And to the extent that self-esteem problems might have existed sporadically, it might have been manufactured by cheapening accomplishment; communicating that you didn't need to do great things to be great. Also, keep in mind that there is a whole lot more accomplishment to recognize if we abandon one-size-fits all approaches that leave a lot of children behind despite the apparent symbolic commitment to not do so. In an often reasonably justified cynical view of the political process – the [sausage factory](#) – it quite often produces exactly the opposite of the intended result.