

Academic Success Involves “Struggle”

Guys: This *two-part* reading explains why educational achievement (doing well in school) has nothing to do with race, but has a lot to do with how cultures approach learning. For example: Asians (in general) believe that academic achievement is not just about intelligence but also about “struggle.” Your job, after digesting this reading, is to think about *your own* approach to learning and to determine if there is anything that requires change on your part. There is something else that you should also consider about child-rearing practices as you go through this reading: the role of *deferred gratification* in ensuring academic success (see the entry on **Marshmallow Test** in the course glossary).

Source: <http://www.webmd.com/children/news/20140505/hard-work-propels-asian-american-students-to-head-of-class-study>

This Propels Asian-American Kids to Head of Class

WebMD News from *HealthDay* / By Amy Norton *HealthDay Reporter*/ MONDAY, May 5, 2014 (HealthDay News)

Asian-American students have a reputation as high achievers, and a [new study](#) suggests their success comes mainly from hard work rather than innate ability.

It's well known that compared with white students, Asian-American kids tend to get higher grades, do better on standardized tests and are more likely to go to college -- including elite universities.

"What we've lacked is an explanation," said Amy Hsin, the lead researcher on the new study and an assistant professor of sociology at Queens College, City University of New York.

In general, Hsin said, there have been three "competing theories" on why Asian-American students tend to excel.

One is that their families have higher incomes and are better educated, versus other minorities and whites. Another, Hsin said, is that Asian kids are "just smarter."

The third theory is that Asian Americans typically put more effort into their schoolwork. And based on the new study, that's the best explanation.

The results, reported Monday in the online edition of *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, are based on data from two long-term studies of U.S. students. They included almost 1,000 Asian Americans, and over 4,000 whites.

Overall, Hsin's team found, Asian Americans got better grades -- an advantage that kept growing from elementary school to high school.

But when it came to tests of basic reading and math abilities, there was no clear difference between results from Asian-American and white students. Nor did parents' income and education explain the gap.

"We found that even newly arrived Asian immigrants with little formal education and low incomes have children who do better in school than their white [U.S.-born] peers," Hsin said.

Instead, she said, it seemed that hard work was the main factor.

The two surveys included teachers' ratings of students' attentiveness, motivation and work habits. And those ratings, Hsin's team found, correlated well with Asian-American students' higher grades.

An expert who reviewed the study said it was "very well done."

"It gives empirical evidence that some of the achievement gap can be explained by hard work," said Sumie Okazaki, a professor of applied psychology at New York University.

And why do Asian Americans tend to put more effort into school?

For one, the study found, they seem to have a stronger belief in the rewards of hard work: Asian Americans were more likely than their white classmates to believe a person can learn to be good at math -- and less likely to believe it's an inborn ability.

If that mindset is key, Okazaki noted, it can be fostered in all kids regardless of ethnicity. "There's nothing exclusively 'Asian' about thinking, 'I can be good at math,'" she said.

Besides that belief in effort, Hsin said the typical "optimism" of recent U.S. immigrants might play a role in Asian Americans' academic success. Much of the academic advantage is seen in Asian families who've arrived in the U.S. relatively recently. Once they've been here for a few generations, the academic edge over other ethnic groups wanes.

Hsin speculated that later-generation Asian Americans might be less optimistic about the "American dream."

But she also noted that recent immigrants from Asia actually benefit from some rich resources. When immigrant families move to ethnic neighborhoods in New York City, for example, they typically have access to community resources to help their kids do well in school -- like tutoring programs and "cram schools."

"There's a whole community support system," Hsin said.

That community aspect is important, she stressed. "This is not just a simple 'pick yourself up by the bootstraps' story," Hsin said. "Other immigrants want their children to succeed, too. But they may not have access to the same community resources."

Still, although Asian-American kids tend to do better academically, they fare worse in other areas -- namely emotional well-being. Hsin's team found that compared with their white peers, Asian-American students were less likely to say they felt good about themselves, and reported more conflicts with their parents.

"That's not surprising," Okazaki said. Past studies have found that Asian-American students report lower self-esteem and lesser well-being than whites.

But, Okazaki cautioned, it's not clear that pressure to excel at school is to blame. There is likely a complex mix of factors involved, she said.

Still, Hsin said, Asian-American kids' lower self-image could at least partly result from pressure to excel at school. "We're not saying Asian-American kids are depressed," she said. "But they may end up being less satisfied with what they do achieve."



Source: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2012/11/12/164793058/struggle-for-smarts-how-eastern-and-western-cultures-tackle-learning>

Struggle For Smarts? How Eastern and Western Cultures Tackle Learning

by [Alix Spiegel](#) November 12, 2012 3:29 AM ET

In 1979, when Jim Stigler was still a graduate student at the University of Michigan, he went to Japan to research teaching methods and found himself sitting in the back row of a crowded fourth-grade math class.

"The teacher was trying to teach the class how to draw three-dimensional cubes on paper," Stigler explains, "and one kid was just totally having trouble with it. His cube looked all cockeyed, so the teacher said to him, 'Why don't you go put yours on the board?' So right there I thought, 'That's interesting! He took the one who can't do it and told him to go and put it on the board.'"

Stigler knew that in American classrooms, it was usually the best kid in the class who was invited to the board. And so he watched with interest as the Japanese student dutifully came to the board and started drawing, but still couldn't complete the cube. Every few minutes, the teacher would ask the rest of the class whether the kid had gotten it right, and the class would look up from their work, and shake their heads no. And as the period progressed, Stigler noticed that he — Stigler — was getting more and more anxious.

"I realized that I was sitting there starting to perspire," he says, "because I was really empathizing with this kid. I thought, 'This kid is going to break into tears!'"

But the kid didn't break into tears. Stigler says the child continued to draw his cube with equanimity. "And at the end of the class, he did make his cube look right! And the teacher said to the class, 'How does that look, class?' And they all looked up and said, 'He did it!' And they broke into applause." The kid smiled a huge smile and sat down, clearly proud of himself.

Stigler is now a professor of psychology at UCLA who studies teaching and learning around the world, and he says it was this small experience that first got him thinking about how differently East and West approach the experience of intellectual struggle.

"I think that from very early ages we [in America] see struggle as an indicator that you're just not very smart," Stigler says. "It's a sign of low ability — people who are smart don't struggle, they just naturally get it, that's our folk theory. Whereas in Asian cultures they tend to see struggle more as an opportunity."

In Eastern cultures, Stigler says, it's just assumed that struggle is a predictable part of the learning process. Everyone is expected to struggle in the process of learning, and so struggling becomes a chance to show that you, the student, have what it takes emotionally to resolve the problem by persisting through that struggle.

"They've taught them that suffering can be a good thing," Stigler says. "I mean it sounds bad, but I think that's what they've taught them."

Granting that there is a lot of cultural diversity within East and West and it's possible to point to counterexamples in each, Stigler still sums up the difference this way: For the most part in American culture, intellectual struggle in schoolchildren is seen as an indicator of weakness, while in Eastern cultures it is not only tolerated but is often used to measure emotional strength.

It's a small difference in approach that Stigler believes has some very big implications.

'Struggle'

Stigler is not the first psychologist to notice the difference in how East and West approach the experience of intellectual struggle.

Jin Li is a professor at Brown University who, like Stigler, compares the learning beliefs of Asian and U.S. children. She says that to understand why these two cultures view struggle so differently, it's good to step back and examine how they think about where academic excellence comes from.

For the past decade or so, Li has been recording conversations between American mothers and their children, and Taiwanese mothers and their children. Li then analyzes those conversations to see how the mothers talk to the children about school.

She shared with me one conversation that she had recorded between an American mother and her 8-year-old son.

The mother and the son are discussing books. The son, though young, is a great student who loves to learn. He tells his mother that he and his friends talk about books even during recess, and she responds with this:

Mother: Do you know that's what smart people do, smart grown-ups?

Child: I know ... talk about books.

Mother: Yeah. So that's a pretty smart thing to do to talk about a book.

Child: Hmmm mmmm.

It's a small exchange — a moment. But Li says, this drop of conversation contains a world of cultural assumptions and beliefs.

Essentially, the American mother is communicating to her son that the cause of his success in school is his intelligence. He's smart — which, Li says, is a common American view.

"The idea of intelligence is believed in the West as a cause," Li explains. "She is telling him that there is something in him, in his mind, that enables him to do what he does."

But in many Asian cultures, Li says, academic excellence isn't linked with intelligence in the same way. "It resides in what they do, but not who they are, what they're born with," she says.

She shares another conversation, this time between a Taiwanese mother and her 9-year-old son. They are talking about the piano — the boy won first place in a competition, and the mother is explaining to him why.

"You practiced and practiced with lots of energy," she tells him. "It got really hard, but you made a great effort. You insisted on practicing yourself."

"So the focus is on the process of persisting through it despite the challenges, not giving up, and that's what leads to success," Li says.

All of this matters because the way you conceptualize the act of struggling with something profoundly affects your actual behavior.

Obviously if struggle indicates weakness — a lack of intelligence — it makes you feel bad, and so you're less likely to put up with it. But if struggle indicates strength — an ability to face down the challenges that inevitably occur when you are trying to learn something — you're more willing to accept it.

And Stigler feels in the real world it is easy to see the consequences of these different interpretations of struggle.

"We did a study many years ago with first-grade students," he tells me. "We decided to go out and give the students an impossible math problem to work on, and then we would measure how long they worked on it before they gave up."

The American students "worked on it less than 30 seconds on average and then they basically looked at us and said, 'We haven't had this,'" he says.

But the Japanese students worked for the entire hour on the impossible problem. "And finally we had to stop the session because the hour was up. And then we had to debrief them and say, 'Oh, that was not a possible problem; that was an impossible problem!' and they looked at us like, 'What kind of animals are we?' " Stigler recalls.

"Think about that [kind of behavior] spread over a lifetime," he says. "That's a big difference."

This is not to imply that the Eastern way of interpreting struggle — or anything else — is better than the Western way, or vice versa. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, which both sides know. Westerns tend to worry that their kids won't be able to compete against Asian kids who excel in many areas but especially in math and science. Li says that educators from Asian countries have their own set of worries.

"Our children are not creative. Our children do not have individuality. They're just robots.' You hear the educators from Asian countries express that concern, a lot," she notes.

So, is it possible for one culture to adopt the beliefs of another culture if they see that culture producing better results?

Both Stigler and Li think that changing culture is hard, but that it's possible to think differently in ways that can help. "Could we change our views of learning and place more emphasis on struggle?" Stigler asks. "Yeah."

For example, Stigler says, in the Japanese classrooms that he's studied, teachers consciously design tasks that are slightly beyond the capabilities of the students they teach, so the students can actually experience struggling with something just outside their reach. Then, once the task is mastered, the teachers actively point out that the student was able to accomplish it through hard work and struggle.

"And I just think that especially in schools, we don't create enough of those experiences, and then we don't point them out clearly enough."

But we can, Stigler says.

In the meantime, he and the other psychologists doing this work say there are more differences to map — differences that allow both cultures to more clearly see who they are.

- **Reader Comment**

Mark Wood • a year ago

I was struck by the way no one noticed the role of one's classmates. The class supported the struggling student and celebrated his achievement. That wouldn't have happened in an American classroom, and I think it's one of the most important factors in finding the strength to struggle on despite setbacks.