How 'Weird' Societies Think About Children's Learning

AN ARTICLE APPEARED in the scholarly journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* in 2010 titled "The Weirdest People in the World?" It revealed that the vast majority of research on human behavior has been carried out with subjects in Western, educated, individualized, rich and democratic societies.

The study's authors, three psychologists at the University of British Columbia, claimed people in what they termed "weird" societies are known to be clustered at one end of the distribution of human characteristics, making them unsuitable as the basis for broad generalizations about how humans think, behave and learn.

Weird societies? That would include the United States.

Comparing Assumptions

Their article rattled the foundations of Western psychology. It *should* have led to thoughtful reappraisals by American educators. Few noticed.

How do we, as citizens of a weird society, think about children's learning? And how does our way differ from how people think in societies near the opposite end of the distribution? A mountain of published data enables these questions to be answered regarding the U.S. vis-à-vis East Asia (China, Japan and Korea), where children are legendary for excelling academically.

So let's compare American and East Asian assumptions about children's learning.

Attaining Potential

Americans assume that a youngster's potential will emerge if she or he is exposed to a wide range of experiences. We provide as many experiences for children as resources will support, hoping to coax out potential. But what if the whole idea of "potential" is limiting?

Americans view potential as a possibility for future excellence in terms of type (athletics? science? music?) and strength (better than classmates? world class?). Newborns' potential isn't known, so parents must be alert to detect them. This belief depicts potential as inborn, fixed and waiting to be awakened by experiences.

> "East Asian parents don't think about potential. They view each child as having a **RANGE OF MALLEABLE ABILITIES**, capable of being shaped and trained to become outstanding, depending on the child's effort."

We encourage children to "live up to your full potential," implying that potential represents a so-far-unknown top level of ability for which the child should strive. "You're learning violin. Are you good enough to get to Carnegie Hall?" (Implied: "Or are you merely good enough to play in the school orchestra?") The message? If you ever *do* reach your inborn, full potential, striving higher will be futile.

East Asian parents don't think about potential. They view each child as having a range of malleable abilities, capable of being shaped and trained to become outstanding, depending on the child's effort.

It's about the child's day-to-day effort, not her or his inborn abilities. The child's effort is under her or his control. How far it takes the child isn't limited because no one imagines that abilities are fixed at birth. The maximum is determined by individual perseverance.

Optimal Learning

American parents believe the best way for their children to learn is by trial-and-error exploration, discovering for themselves how things work. This exemplifies our individualistic mindset, leading us to value self-reliance.

When toddlers are puzzling through the steps of a basic skill, parents tend to observe and encourage, only infrequently instructing, demonstrating or correcting errors. When the toddler gets it right, parents praise. During the school years, parents show interest in their child's academic progress, observing and encouraging, occasionally disciplining. Rarely do parents participate in their child's learning by instructing, diagnosing errors or drilling.

East Asians parents think they're responsible for, and in charge of, their child's learning during both toddler years *and* school years. They don't encourage and praise. They participate.

For example, if it's about learning a basic skill, parents show the child how to do it. This is called "instruction by guiding the hand." Parents take responsibility by actively, even manually, shaping and demonstrating. They drill, quiz and assign their own homework. They are their child's learning coaches.

Although school reforms have altered numerous aspects of how American educators deliver instruction, our children are learning only marginally better. East Asian children are more effective learners. Perhaps what needs reforming isn't our schools but how we *think* about children's learning.

CORNELIUS GROVE is managing partner of the leadership consultancy Grovewell in Brooklyn, N.Y., and author of *The Drive to Learn* (Rowman & Littlefield). E-mail: cng@thedrivetolearn.info