Differential educational attainment according to Ethnicity

Read the article at the end of your booklets entitled – Dragon Mother – what does this suggest about the reasons why some ethnic groups do better than others in education.
Read the information on pages 131-134 of the textbook.

1. Explain why it is difficult to make judgements about differential educational attainment by ethnicity.

2. For each of the 3 stages of education (GCSE, post 16, higher education), note down the 3 most important points.

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<td>Higher education</td>
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3. Explain evidence that the ‘gap’ between ethnic groups in terms of educational attainment is closing.

4. Explain the link between ethnicity and gender

5. Explain the link between class and ethnicity

6. Explain the evidence that there is a level of white British underachievement
Material and cultural factors affecting underachievement

Ethnic diversity and achievement

Material and cultural explanations of educational disadvantage are referred to in the previous topic also apply to the experience of minority ethnic, because a higher proportion than White British pupils tend to be working-
class.

It is clearly not possible to argue that the worst case systematically happens to every minority ethnic child. The interplay between class, gender and ethnicity is highly complex and is affected by a multitude of factors both within and outside the school. However, as we saw from the ‘Getting you thinking’ exercise, relative deprivation is a key factor and higher proportions of people from ethnic minority groups than White British are from lower-income households (see Table 3.1).

These are clearly noteworthy differences from the norm for certain ethnic categories. African-Caribbean males are near the bottom of each class group in terms of achievement as well as attainment; however, working-class Indian and Bangladeshi females, although they suffer from initial disadvantages in school, tend to improve significantly better than working-class White pupils by the time they take their GCSEs. Fuller (1984) suggests that they may ‘appear’ coast in order to present a positive self-image to boys and teachers, but that they recognize the importance of getting good qualifications.

African, Indian, Chinese and African-Asian origin also do very well within the education system. There is a strong emphasis on self-improvement through education in these cultures, and many of the children come from professional backgrounds, providing support, appropriate social and material advantages. Their culture is perceived more positively by teachers than that of, for example, some African-Caribbean pupils. In addition to all of the points listed in the previous topic (for children from working-class backgrounds), many pupils from particular ethnic minority groups are relatively disadvantaged within the education system.

According to a recent report commissioned for the DfES (Wannop Report 2007), Black pupils:

- are significantly more likely to be permanently excluded and routinely punished more harshly
- are twice as likely to be referred to juvenile justice systems
- are 1.5 times as likely as White British pupils to be identiﬁed with special educational needs
- are outperformed White pupils in entry tests (but when these were changed to teacher observations, the gap closed)
- are disproportionately put in bottom sets – due to being identiﬁed with special educational needs
- are much less likely than the average to be identiﬁed as gifted and talented.

While some Pakistani and Bangladeshi children still believe relatively in school, recent research has shown these groups to be catching up. Bangladeshis pupils have made the greatest gains since 2000 with a gain of 28 percentage points, which brings them to the national average.

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<th>Ethnic group</th>
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<td>White British</td>
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<td>Mixed heritage</td>
<td>25.2</td>
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<td>Indian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>58.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>African-Black</td>
<td>26.2</td>
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<td>Black other</td>
<td>41.4</td>
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<td>by other group</td>
<td>29.6</td>
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Table 3.1: Percentage of pupils entitled to a free school meal ( FSM ) by ethnicity

Strand: Indian and African-Caribbean pupils

Highlighting a relatively long-term trend, Strand (2007) focuses on two ethnic groups of particular interest, as both are relatively new to the UK with many of the first four years of secondary school, relative to their White peers. Indian pupils widen the gap by achieving significantly better than their White peers, whereas African-Caribbean pupils do so by achieving considerably less progress. According to Strand, Indian pupils’ relative progress can in part be explained by positive factors such as:

- higher parental involvement
- undertaking high levels of homework
- low levels of truancy, exclusion, or social services family involvement
- high resource provision at home (computers and private tuition)
- high parental monitoring of their children’s whereabouts.

However, his research can not fully account for the poor progress of his African-Caribbean pupils. While White British pupils generally, African-Caribbean pupils on average experience greater poverty (entitlement to FSM), are more likely to live in rented accommodation and to attend schools that are more deprived, as well as live in more deprived neighbourhoods, than White pupils. In terms of social class and mother’s educational qualifications, however, African-Caribbean pupils do not differ markedly from White British pupils. African-Caribbean pupils (and their parents) have higher educational aspirations. They are more likely to receive better guidance to school, a higher academic self-concept and are more likely to be actively planning for the future. Despite this, African-Caribbean pupils, especially boys, are less likely to achieve lower level of attainment much more likely to have identified specific educational needs and to be temporarily excluded from school, and are less likely to do homework.

Given the similar socio-economic background and, if anything, higher social aspiration of the advantaged/disadvantaged relative to Indian pupils, Strand concludes that it is difficult to explain the poor progress of the African-Caribbean group.

If it is, therefore, necessary to look at wider explanations of ethnic group differences, beyond those described above.

Cultural factors

As the above analysis and research have confirmed, underachievement has been blamed on the high numbers of one-parent families in African-Caribbean communities (37 per cent compared with 23 per cent for White British families). Some politicians have suggested that, because many of these families are female-headed, African-Caribbean boys, in particular, lack the discipline of a father-figure. They suggest that one may account for the high percentage of African-Caribbeans in tertiary school, for girls, but that for boys, the related spacial model provided by a strong, independent single mother is a motivating influence and, this helps to explain their relative high level of achievement. However, the level of family disruption among one-parent household is not a necessary cause of low attainment where it occurs, according to Strand, it is significant but not a dominant factor.

Single-parent households have, on average, lower income, lower levels of parental stress and less time for educational input to the child, all of which might impact negatively on educational attainment. However, although a higher proportion of African-Caribbean do live in one-parent families, it should be noted that most children of African-Caribbean origin live in nuclear families.

Many working-class and ethnic minority pupils may feel undervalued and demotivated by an educational system that does not recognize their qualities, which are based on their class and ethnic culture.

Language has also been seen as a problem for children of African-Caribbean origin, who may speak different dialects of English, and for children from other ethnic groups who come from homes where a language other than English is spoken. This language disadvantage is related to more problems in doing schoolwork and communicating with teachers, leading to disadvantage at school. Bell (2002) shows how ethnic-minority parents are at a disadvantage when trying to get their children into the better schools. The parents, especially if born abroad, may not have much experience of the British education system and may not be able to negotiate the system. This may be compounded by a lack of confidence in their language skills.

Issues such as uniform (which marks a school well and fosters an impression of discipline) may disrupt teacher-pupil relationships, particularly between Black pupils and school staff. Ethnic minority pupils whose cultural influences may enter more pressure on them to subvert the formal dress codes (animal fur and animal into school), which may provoke more anti-school behaviour, truancy and even-records of ‘problem children’. Gervitz (2002) identifies further socially exclusive practices in the creation of complex application forms requiring high levels of literacy and often available only in English.

In-school factors

The above section shows how difficult it is to generalise about ethnic and educational achievement and reveals some of the complex links between social class, gender and ethnicity. But the factors identified in the report also operate on the home environment and culture of ethnic groups. How we see the processes and relations of ethnic minority groups and how this occurs within schools to gain a fuller picture. Once again, these are often influenced by interactionist perspectives although many also take into account patterns of racism and ethnic inequalities in wider society.

Labelling, racism and subcultures

Ethnic minority boys

Boys of African-Caribbean origin often have the label ‘unruly’, ‘disrespectful’ and ‘difficult to control’ applied to them. Gilmour (1990) found that African-Caribbean pupils were more likely to be given detentions than other pupils. This was because the teachers interpreted the DfES (2000) on the dress and manner of speech of African-Caribbean pupils as representing a challenge to their authority. In perceiving their treatment of pupils as more severe, pupils responded, understandably, in accordance with their labels. Tony Sewell (1996) claimed that many teachers were fearful of Black boys in school, the root of which is seen to be stereotypical assumptions. Jasper (2002) goes further to suggest that the expectations that White female teachers of Black boys’ behaviour dictate the form and style of the teaching that they offer, a style less conducive to learning than they might otherwise do.
Focus on research

Tony Sewell
Black masculinities and schooling

Tony Sewell (1998) conducted research in comprehensive schools in London. The bulk of the study took place in what Sewell refers to as 'Township School.' This was a boys' comprehensive for children aged 11 to 16. There were 61 students of Asian origin, 63 of African origin, 160 of African-Caribbean origin, 31 mixed race students, 127 White boys and 23 'others.'

Sewell gathered his material through an ethnographic approach using semi-structured interviews and observation. At the time, he was in his early 30s and describes himself as Black. He is careful to point out that he was able to make very good relationships with the boys and was able to mix with them socially. He describes this process as being able to 'hit.'

Sewell found that some Black pupils were disciplined excessively by teachers who were socialized into racist attitudes and who felt threatened by these students' masculinity, sexuality and physical skills. Furthermore, the boys felt that their culture received little or no positive recognition.


subcultures have distinctive reactions to racism, prejudice and discrimination, which may have different effects on educational performance. African-Caribbean males often react angrily to and reject the White-dominated education system, gaining little or no reward. White pupils, on the other hand, are often rewarded for their efforts. Indians show their anger, but do not tend to reject the education system. Instead, they succeed because they use the system to their advantage.

According to Sewell (1998) and Dorell and Sharpe (2004), in responding to teacher's bible, racism and poor education, Black boys construct a form of masculinity that earns respect from peers and females. This masculine role may have very little relevance for males in general, but in a decline in manual work and increasing opportunities within the service sector. However, for young Black men, with more limited employment prospects, opposition to schooling still has some relevance in highlighting their masculinity and alternative attributes of success. Despite the fact of their relatively high academic self-concept (Strand 2007), educational success is seen as a feminine thing. The way for them to get respect is through the credibility of the street. In Sewell's words, the young man wants to be a 'street hoo.' Success in the school room marks the Black boy out from his peers or classmates and is likely to make him the target of ridicule or bullying. According to Sewell, educational failure becomes a badge to wear with pride. Aspects of this view have been reflected in concerns about the development of 'gangsta' culture and the absence of positive Black male role-models at home as well as in schools. The current moral panic over gun and crime is in part supported by such assertions.

A similar response has been identified among some Asian youths – in particular, Bangladeshi boys, whose economic prospects are generally better than those of other Asian groups. Dorell and Sharpe (2004) recognized that this masculine 'warrior' perception by peers existed alongside perceptions of other Asian youths as 'weakling' conforming to demands of the school or 'patronage,' whose loyalty lay with the prescriptions of the male-dominated Asian family.

Connelly (2008) also examined the treatment in school of boys of South Asian origin. He found that teachers tended to see some South Asian boys as immature rather than seriously deviant. Much of their bad behaviour went unnoticed by teachers and was not punished to the same extent as that of Black boys. The South Asian boys, therefore, had difficulty in gaining status as males, which made it more difficult for them to enjoy school and feel competent. Nevertheless, teachers did have high expectations of their academic potential and they were often praised and encouraged.

Ethnic-minority girls

Connolly (1998) found in his recent investigation of three classes of 5 to 9 year olds of different ethnicities, girls in the primary school that some negative stereotypes are not just confined to boys. Like Black boys, girls were perceived by teachers as potentially disruptive but likely to be good at sports. The girls in the primary school tended to 'underplay' the Black girls' educational achievements and focus on their

Focus on research

Tikly et al. (2006) Alming high

In 2003, the government set up a programme called 'Alming high' to help raise the achievement of African-Caribbean pupils. It provided extra resources to 30 schools where African and Caribbean pupils were performing below the average for all pupils between the ages of 11 and 16. In 2005, a team of sociologists led by Leen Tikly evaluated the success of the project.

Tikly's team used postal questionnaires to produce quantitative information about setting, examination tiers and rates of exclusion. The questionnaires were returned by only 18 schools at the start of the project and 11 at the end. One third of the sample (10 schools) were subsequently involved in semi-structured interviews with, for example, governor, headteachers, pupils, parents and teachers. These produced qualitative data about the extent to which schools recognized and valued ethnic diversity and the ways they treated ethnic minority pupils in relation to behaviour and discipline. Those that did most appeared to have fewer behavioural problems and lower exclusion rates.

For each:

Use the information in your textbook, in the photocopy and from your notes to draw up a fact sheet about why material factors might lead to differential educational attainment according to ethnicity.

Your fact sheet must include:

- Evidence that ethnic attainment is linked to material factors,
- Reasons why material factors might explain ethnic inequality,
- Sociologists/theories who argue this
- Any opposing evidence if possible.

Extension task: Identify four points that you would discuss (and what evidence you’d use in support of these arguments) if you were asked either of the questions: Outline and assess how far material / cultural factors / in school factors are responsible for differential educational attainment according to ethnicity.

Material factors / Cultural factors / In school factors

Key terms

- Anomie
- Cold-paucy
- Strange condition
- Situation
- Quality

Discover a set of ideas that tell us how to make sense of the world, what kind of questions to ask, what counts as a problem and how to solve problems.

- Ethnocentric emphasis
- White middle-class culture

- Institutional racism
- Service sector
- Sector group
- Economic activity

- Cultural difference
- Identity

The curriculum

Some sociologists argue that the curriculum contains material that disadvantages ethnic minorities. The knowledge that they encounter at school may not contribute to their own cultural experience, while ethnocentrism, resulting from the use of out-of-date material, could be potentially offensive by reflecting old colonial values and racist stereotypes. Coard (1971) showed how the content of education also ignored Black people. The people who are welcomed to be White, while Black culture, music and art are largely ignored. Coard argued that this led to low self-esteem among Black pupils. However, this assertion was refuted by both the Swann Report (1981) and Stone (1981), who noted that despite feeling discriminated against by some teachers, African-Canadian children had been able to maintain an extremely positive self-image.

Multiple cultural education, which acknowledges the contribution of all of the world’s cultures, has become more common, although it has been criticized for focusing only on external factors (‘herbs and samsaras’) and failing to address the real problem of racism. Ethnic minority languages still do not have the same status as English languages, and schools are still required to uphold Christian assumptions. The National Curriculum itself has also been criticized for being ethnocentric – especially its focus on British history and literature. Geography also emphasizes Britain’s positive contribution to the rest of the world, rather than the negative consequences of unfair trade and employment practices. Tilley et al. (2006) in their study of 30 comprehensive schools (see also Research methods, p. 217), found that a significant number of African-Caribbean pupils noted their invisibility in the curriculum and were embarrassed by the White European focus. Moreover, when Black history was acknowledged within the curriculum, many pupils reported their frustration with the tendency to focus on slavery. However, while the curriculum may be ethnocentric, it is unlikely that this, in isolation, is a major factor in the underachievement of ethnic minorities, as it is not the case that all pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds underachieve to similar degrees. Indian and Chinese pupils’ achievement, for example, is above the national average.

Institutional racism

Gillborn (2003) argues that schools are institutionally racist as teachers interpret policy in a way that disadvantages Black pupils. For example, setting, schemes for gifted and talented pupils, and vocational schemes for the less academically able, understate the abilities of Black children, relegating them to low-ability groups, a restricted curriculum and entry for lower-level exams. The increased marking of schools’ fee Policy (6) has led to what some writers have called an ‘A to C economy’. According to Gillborn and Hodell (1999) this creates a colouring of education, whereby teachers are forced to focus on those in danger of not realizing their potential for an A to C grade. This then negates the aspirations and high achievement, leaving them to their own devices. Many ethnic minority pupils are judged, often subjectively, to belong to the former group. Hatcher (1996) examined the role of school governing bodies and found that they gave low priority to race issues, failing to deal adequately with pupil racism. Furthermore, formal links with ethnic minority parents tended not to exist, which meant that little was done to address their concerns. Ethnic minority pupils need therefore tended to be low priority or disregarded. Ranson (2005) highlights the unrepresentativeness of school governing bodies which are ‘disproportionately White, middle-aged, middle-class, middle-income, public/private community service workers’.

Problems of categorization

Classifying according to ethnic origin is by no means simple. The term ‘ethnic minority’, for example, includes many different groups and does not take account of class and gender differences within those groups. Gillborn and Gips (1995) argue that terms such as ‘White’, ‘Black’, ‘Asian’ and ‘other’ actually prevent any real understanding of differences in achievement. Postmodernists go further, they argue that the increasingly diverse nature of contemporary societies makes it impossible to explain educational achievement (for anything else) in terms of broad categories such as class or ethnicity. And that the simplifications that are made actually do more harm than good. They suggest that a conscious attempt needs to be made to understand the complexities of cultural difference and identity in modern society.

Institutional racism

Institutional racism is that built into the normal day-to-day practices of an organization.

Multi-cultural education

Educational emphasis on recognizing cultural diversity.
Material explanations of differential educational attainment by Ethnicity
## Material explanations of differential educational attainment by Ethnicity

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Cultural explanations of differential educational attainment by Ethnicity
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In school explanations of differential educational attainment by Ethnicity
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Outline and assess the view that ethnic difference in educational achievement are caused by factors inside schools

PLAN
A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids. They wonder what these parents do to produce so many maths whizzes and music prodigies, what it’s like inside the family, and whether they could do it too. Well, I can tell them, because I’ve done it. Here are some things my daughters, Sophia and Lulu, were never allowed to do:

- Attend a sleepover
- Have a play date
- Be in a school play
- Complain about not being in a school play
- Watch TV or play computer games
- Choose their extracurricular activities
- Get any grade less than an A
- Not be the No 1 student in every subject except gym and drama
- Play any instrument other than the piano or violin

I’m using the term “Chinese mother” loosely. I recently met a super-successful white guy, and after comparing notes we decided that his working-class father had definitely been a Chinese mother. I know Korean, Indian, Jamaican, Irish and Ghanaian parents who qualify too. Conversely, I know some mothers of Chinese heritage, almost always born in the West, who are not Chinese mothers.

Western parents — and I’m also using the term loosely — come in all varieties. But even when they think they’re being strict, they usually don’t come close to being Chinese mothers. For example, my western friends who consider themselves strict make their children practise their instrument an hour at most. An hour at most. For a Chinese mother, the first hour is the easy part. It’s hours two and three that get tough.

Despite our squeamishness about cultural stereotypes, there are tons of studies showing marked and quantifiable differences between Chinese and westerners when it comes to parenting. In one study of 50 western American mothers and 48 Chinese immigrant mothers, almost 70% of the western mothers said either that “stressing academic success is not good for children” or that “parents need to foster the idea that learning is fun”. Roughly 0% of the Chinese mothers felt the same way. The vast majority said that they believed their children could be “the best” students, that “academic achievement reflects successful parenting” and that if children did not excel at school then there was “a problem” and parents were “not doing their job”.

Other studies indicate that Chinese parents spend approximately 10 times as long as western parents everyday drilling academic activities with their children. Some may think that the sports-mad parent is an analogue to the Chinese mother. This is so wrong. Unlike your typical overscheduling soccer mom, the Chinese mother believes that (1) schoolwork always comes first; (2) an A-minus is a bad grade; (3) your children must be two years ahead of their classmates in maths; (4) you must never compliment your children in public; (5) if your child ever disagrees with a teacher or coach, you must always take the side of the teacher or coach; (6) the only activities your children should be permitted to do are those in which they can eventually win a medal; and (7) that medal must be gold.

My husband, Jed, is Jewish, which makes our children Chinese-Jewish-American, an ethnic group that may sound exotic but actually forms a majority in certain circles, especially in university towns. (Jed became a law professor at Yale the year before Sophia was born, as did I when she was seven.) The deal Jed and I struck when we got married was that our children would speak Mandarin and be raised Jewish. I don’t speak Mandarin — my native dialect is Hokkien Chinese — and Jed is not religious in the least, but the arrangement somehow worked. I hired a Chinese nanny to speak Mandarin constantly to Sophia, and we celebrated our first Hanukkah when she was two months old.
As Sophia got older, it seemed she got the best of both cultures. She was probing and questioning from the Jewish side. And from me, the Chinese side, she got skills — lots of skills. I don’t mean inborn skills or anything like that, just skills learnt the diligent, disciplined, confidence-expanding Chinese way.

My family comes from southern China’s Fujian province. All of my grandparents were born there, but at different points in the 1920s and 1930s they boarded boats for the Philippines, where there was said to be more opportunity. My parents came from there to America in 1960 as postgraduate students; and, after getting a PhD at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in less than two years, my father became an assistant professor at a university in Indiana.

Growing up in the Midwest, my three younger sisters and I knew we were different from everyone else. We were required to speak Chinese at home — the punishment was one whack of the chopsticks for every English word uttered. We drilled maths and piano every afternoon and were never allowed to sleep over at friends’ houses. Every evening when my father came home from work, I took off his shoes and socks and brought him his slippers. Our report cards had to be perfect. While our friends were rewarded for Bs, for us an A-minus was unthinkable.

In eighth grade I won second place in a history contest and brought my family to the awards ceremony. Somebody else had won the prize for best all-around student. Afterwards, my father said to me: “Never, never disgrace me like that again.” Yet I found strength and confidence in my peculiar family. We started off as outsiders together, and we discovered America together.

One of my greatest fears is family decline. There’s an old Chinese saying: “Prosperity can never last for three generations.” I’ll bet that if someone with empirical skills conducted a longitudinal survey about intergenerational performance, they’d find a remarkably common pattern among Chinese immigrants:

- The immigrant generation (like my parents) will work non-stop until they become successful engineers, scientists, doctors, academics or businessmen. As parents, they will be extremely strict and rabidly thrifty. (“Don’t throw out those leftovers! Why are you using so much dishwashing liquid? You don’t need a beauty salon — I can cut your hair even nicer.”) They will invest in property. Everything they do and earn will go towards their children’s education and future.
- The next generation (mine) will be high-achieving. They will usually play the piano and/or violin. They will enter a top university. They will be professionals — lawyers, doctors, bankers, and surpas their parents in income. They will be less frugal than their parents. If they are female, they will often marry a white person. Whether male or female, they will not be as strict with their children as their parents were with them.
- The next generation (Sophia’s and Lulu’s) is the one I spend nights lying awake worrying about. Because of the hard work of their parents and grandparents, this generation will be born into the great comforts of the upper middle class. Even as children they will own many hardback books (an almost criminal luxury from the point of view of immigrant parents).

They will have wealthy friends who get rewarded for B-pluses. They will expect expensive clothes. Most problematically, they will feel they have individual rights and be much more likely to disobey their parents and to ignore career advice. In short, all indicators point to this generation being headed for decline.

Well, not on my watch. From the moment Sophia was born and I looked into her cute and knowing face, I was determined not to let it happen to her, not to raise a soft, entitled child. —

By the time Sophia was three, she was reading Sartre and doing simple set theory and could write 100 Chinese characters. (Jed’s translation: she recognised the words “No exit”, could draw two overlapping circles and, okay, maybe on the Chinese characters.) As I watched western parents slathering praise on their kids for drawing a squiggle or waving a stick, I came to see that Chinese parents have two things over their western counterparts: (1) higher dreams for their children and (2) higher regard for their children in the sense of knowing how much they can take.

Of course, I wanted Sophia to be well rounded and to have hobbies and activities. Not just any activity, such as “crafts”, which can lead nowhere, but a meaningful and highly difficult hobby with the potential for depth and virtuosity.

In the Suzuki method of teaching piano, there are seven books, and everybody has to start with book 1. The system, which is known for producing “child prodigies”, was perfect for Sophia. She learnt really quickly and could stay focused for a long time. She also had a big cultural advantage: most of her school mates had liberal western parents. Other kids got paid for practising, with giant ice cream sundaes or Lego kits. Many were excused from practice altogether on lesson days.

A key feature of the Suzuki approach is that a parent is expected to attend every lesson and then to supervise practice sessions. With me at her side, Sophia practised at least 90 minutes every day, including weekends. On lesson days, we practised twice as long. I made Sophia memorise everything, even if it wasn’t required, and I never paid her a penny. That’s how we blasted through those Suzuki books. And I still felt we were going too slow.
This seems a good time to get something off my chest. The truth is, it wasn’t always enjoyable for Sophia to have me as a mother. According to Sophia, here are three things I said to her as she practised the piano:

1 Oh my God, you’re just getting worse and worse.
2 I’m going to count to three, then I want MUSICALITY!
3 If the next time’s not PERFECT, I’m going to TAKE ALL YOUR STUFFED ANIMALS AND BURN THEM!

In retrospect, these coaching methods seem a bit extreme. On the other hand, they were effective. Sophia and I were a great mother-daughter fit. I had the conviction and the tunnel-vision drive. Sophia had the maturity, patience and empathy I should have had but didn’t. She accepted my premise that I knew and wanted what was best for her — and she cut me a break when I was bad-tempered or said hurtful things.

Chinese parents do things that would seem unimaginable — even legally actionable — to westerners. Chinese mothers can say to their daughters, “Hey, fatty — lose some weight.” They can say, “You’re lazy. All your classmates are getting ahead of you.”

As an adult, I once did the same thing to Sophia, calling her “garbage” in English when she had acted disrespectfully to me. It worked great, but when I mentioned this at a dinner party, I was immediately ostracised. One guest named Marcy broke down in tears and had to leave early.

I’ve thought long and hard about how Chinese parents can get away with what they do. I think there are three big differences between the Chinese and western parental mindsets.

First, I’ve noticed western parents are extremely anxious about their children’s self-esteem. They worry about how their children will feel if they fail at something, and they constantly reassure their children about how good they are, notwithstanding a mediocre performance. In other words, western parents are concerned about their children’s psyches. Chinese parents aren’t. They assume strength, not fragility.

The understanding is that Chinese children must spend their lives repaying their parents by obeying them and making them proud. Chinese parents demand perfect grades because they believe that their child can get them. If their child doesn’t get them, the Chinese parent assumes it’s because the child didn’t work hard enough, so they will get dozens, maybe hundreds, of practice tests and work through them with their child for as long as it takes to get the grade up to an A. The solution to substandard performance is always to excoriate, punish and shame the child. (And when Chinese kids do excel, there is plenty of ego-inflating praise lavished in the privacy of the home.)

Once, when I was young — maybe more than once — when I was extremely disrespectful to my mother, my father angrily called me “garbage” in our Hokkien dialect. I felt terrible and deeply ashamed of what I had done, but it didn’t damage my self-esteem or anything like that. I knew exactly how highly he thought of me.

Second, Chinese parents believe that their kids owe them everything. The reason for this is unclear, but it’s probably a combination of Confucian filial piety and the fact that the parents have sacrificed and done so much for their children.

The understanding is that Chinese children must spend their lives repaying their parents by obeying them and making them proud. (Jed, who was raised in a different mould, has the opposite view. “Children don’t choose their parents,” he once said to me. “They don’t even choose to be born. Kids don’t owe their parents anything. Their duty will be to their own kids.” This strikes me as a terrible deal for the western parent.) Third, Chinese parents believe they know what is best for their children. That’s why Chinese daughters can’t have boyfriends at school and why Chinese kids can’t go to camp. It’s hard to find the words to describe my relationship with Sophia’s sister, Lulu. “All-out nuclear warfare” doesn’t quite capture it. The irony is that Lulu and I are very much alike: she inherited my hot-tempered, viper-tongued, fast-forgiving personality. Jed has never understood how one minute Lulu and I will be screaming death threats at each other, and the next minute we’ll be lying in bed, Lulu’s arms wrapped around me, talking about violins or reading and laughing together.

I had my first face-off with Lulu when she was about three. It was a freezing winter afternoon in New Haven, Connecticut. Jed was at work at Yale law school and Sophia was at kindergarten. I decided it would be a perfect time to introduce Lulu to the piano.

Excited about working together — with her brown curls, round eyes and china doll face, Lulu was deceptively cute — I put her on the piano bench, on top of some comfortable pillows. I then demonstrated how to play a single note with one finger, evenly, three times, and asked her to do the same. A small request, but Lulu refused, preferring instead to smash at many notes at the same time with two open palms.
When I asked her to stop, she smashed harder and faster. When I tried to pull her away from the piano, she began yelling, crying and kicking furiously. Fifteen minutes later, she was still yelling, crying and kicking, and I’d had it. I dragged the screeching demon to our back door and threw it open. The wind chill was ferocious, and my face hurt from just a few seconds’ exposure to the icy air. But I was determined to raise an obedient Chinese child if it killed me.

“You can’t stay in the house if you don’t listen to Mommy,” I said sternly. “Now, are you ready to be a good girl? Or do you want to go outside?”

Lulu stepped outside. She faced me, defiant. A dull dread began seeping though my body. Lulu was wearing only a sweater, a ruffled skirt and tights. She had stopped crying. Indeed, she was eerily still.

“Okay, good — you’ve decided to behave,” I said quickly. “You can come in now.”

Lulu shook her head.

“Don’t be silly, Lulu.” I was panicking. “It’s freezing. You’re going to get sick. Come in now.”

Lulu’s teeth were chattering, but she shook her head again. She would sooner freeze to death than give in. I had to change tactics; I couldn’t win this one. Plus I might be locked up by child services. I reversed, now begging, coddling and bribing Lulu to come back into the house.

Eventually, Lulu took up not just the piano but also the violin. At about seven, she was working on a French piano piece called The Little White Donkey. You can just imagine a little donkey ambling along a country road with its master, but it’s also incredibly difficult for young players because the two hands have to keep utterly different rhythms.

Lulu couldn’t do it. We worked on it non-stop for a week, drilling each of her hands separately, over and over again. But whenever we tried putting the hands together, one always morphed into the other and everything fell apart. Finally, Lulu announced in exasperation that she was giving up and stomped off.

“Get back to the piano now,” I ordered.

“You can’t make me.”

“Oh yes I can.”

Back at the piano, Lulu made me pay. She punched, thrashed and kicked. She grabbed the music score and tore it to shreds. I taped it back together and encased it in plastic so that it could never be destroyed again. Then I hauled Lulu’s dolls’ house to the car and told her I’d donate it to the Salvation Army piece by piece if she didn’t have The Little White Donkey perfect by the next day.

When Lulu said, “I thought you were going to the Salvation Army — why are you still here?”, I threatened her with no lunch, no dinner, no Christmas or Hanukkah presents, no birthday parties for two, three, four years. When she still kept playing it wrong, I told her she was deliberately working herself into a frenzy because she was secretly afraid she couldn’t do it. I told her to stop being lazy, cowardly and self-indulgent.

Jed took me aside. He told me to stop insulting Lulu — which I wasn’t even doing; I was just motivating her — and that he didn’t think threatening Lulu was helpful. Also, he said, maybe Lulu really just couldn’t do the technique — perhaps she didn’t have the co-ordination yet — had I considered that possibility?

“You just don’t believe in her,” I accused.

“That’s ridiculous,” Jed said scornfully. “Of course I do.”

“Sophia could play the piece when she was this age.”

“But Lulu and Sophia are different people,” Jed pointed out.

“Oh no, not this,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Everyone is special in their own special way. Even losers are special in their own special way. Well, don’t worry, you don’t have to lift a finger. I’m willing to put in as long as it takes, and I’m happy to be the one hated. You can be the one they adore because you make them pancakes and take them to baseball games.”

I rolled up my sleeves and went back to Lulu. I used every weapon and tactic I could think of. We worked right through dinner into the night, and I wouldn’t let Lulu get up, not for water, not even to go to the lavatory. The house became a war zone and I lost my voice yelling, but still there seemed to be only negative progress, and even I began to have doubts.
Then, out of the blue, Lulu did it. Her hands suddenly came together — her right and left hands each doing its own imperturbable thing — just like that. Lulu realised this at the same time as I did. I held my breath. She tried it tentatively again. Then she played it more confidently and faster, and still the rhythm held. A moment later, she was beaming. “Mommy, look — it’s easy!”

After that, she wanted to play the piece again and again and wouldn’t leave the piano. That night, she came to sleep in my bed, and we snuggled and hugged.

When she performed The Little White Donkey at a recital a few weeks later, parents came up to me and said, “What a perfect piece for Lulu — it’s so spunky and so her.” Even Jed gave me credit for that one. Western parents worry a lot about their children’s self-esteem. But as a parent, one of the worst things you can do for your child’s self-esteem is to let them give up on the scale side, there’s nothing better for building confidence than learning you can do something you thought you couldn’t.

There are all these new books portraying Asian mothers as scheming, callous, overdriven people indifferent to their kids’ true interests. For their part, many Chinese secretly believe that they care more about their children and are willing to sacrifice much more for them than westerners, who seem perfectly content to let their children turn out badly. I think it’s a misunderstanding on both sides.

Western parents try to respect their children’s individuality, encouraging them to pursue their true passions, supporting their choices and providing positive reinforcement and a nurturing environment. The Chinese believe that the best way to protect their children is by preparing them for the future, letting them see what they’re capable of and arming them with skills, work habits and inner confidence that no one can take away.

Sophia had her first big music moment when she won the Greater New Haven concerto competition at the age of 10, earning the right to perform as a piano soloist with a youth orchestra. She was going to perform Mozart’s Rondo for Piano and Orchestra in D Major, one of the composer’s most uplifting pieces.

By then I had become a drill sergeant. We worked late into the night every day for weeks. I spared no harsh words, and got even tougher when Sophia’s eyes filled with tears. When the big day finally arrived, I was suddenly paralysed; I could never be a performer myself. But Sophia just seemed excited, and I could tell she was happy. As I watched her performing, she looked tiny and brave. My heart ached with a kind of indescribable pain. Afterwards, friends and strangers came up to congratulate Jed and me. Sophia’s performance was breathtaking, they said, her playing so graceful and elegant. “It’s obvious that she’s enjoying herself,” Larry, the boisterous director of her music school, said to me. “You can’t sound that good if you’re not having fun.”

For some reason, his comment reminded me of an incident when Sophia was just starting the piano but I was already pushing hard. Jed discovered some funny marks on the piano, on the wood just by middle C. When he asked Sophia about them, a guilty look came over her. Jed crouched down and examined them more closely. “Sophia,” he said slowly, “could these possibly be teeth marks?” It turned out they were. After more questioning, Sophia, who was perhaps six at the time, confessed that she often gnawed on the piano. When Jed explained that the piano was the most expensive piece of furniture we owned, she promised not to do it again. I’m not quite sure why Larry’s remark brought that episode to mind, but it also reminds me of another one.

When Jed’s mother — Florence, known as Popo to the girls — became fragile from leukaemia towards the end of her life, we brought her home to New Haven to stay in the guest room. At her funeral, both Sophia and Lulu read short speeches they’d written themselves.

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Here’s part of what Lulu said: “When I think of Popo, I think of her happy and laughing. She loved to be happy and that made me feel happy too.”

And this is part of what Sophia said: “Popo always wanted intellectual stimulation, full happiness — to get the utmost vitality and thought out of every minute. And I think she got it, right up to the end. I hope some day I can learn to do the same.”

I was proud and glad that Jed and I had taken Florence in, the Chinese way, and that the girls had witnessed us doing it. I was also proud and glad that Sophia and Lulu had helped take care of Florence. But with the words “loved to be happy” and “full happiness” ringing in my head, I also wondered whether down the road, if I were sick, the girls would take me into their homes and do the same for me — or whether they would opt for happiness and freedom.

Happiness is not a concept I tend to dwell on. Chinese parenting does not address happiness. This has always worried me. When I see the piano- and violin-induced calluses on my daughters’ fingertips, or the teeth marks on the piano, I’m sometimes seized with doubt.

But here’s the thing. When I look around at all the western families that fall apart — all the grown sons and daughters who can’t stand to be around their parents or don’t even talk to them — I have a hard time believing that western parenting does a better job with happiness.

I’m really not sure why this is. Maybe it’s brainwashing. Or maybe it’s Stockholm syndrome. But here’s one thing I’m sure of: western children are definitely no happier than Chinese ones.