

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.

Evidence of differential educational attainment according to Ethnicity

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.

GCSE	
A level	
Higher education	

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 under achievement

Material and cultural factors affecting underachievement

Ethnic diversity and achievement

Material and cultural explanations of educational disadvantage referred to in the previous topic also apply to the experience of ethnic minorities, 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 inside and outside school. However, as we saw from the 'Getting you thinking' exercise, relative deprivation is a key factor and higher proportions of people from ethnic minorities, than White British, are from lower-income households (see Table 3.1).

There 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 attainment. However, working-class African-Caribbean females, although they suffer from initial disadvantages in school, tend to do significantly better than working-class White pupils by the time they take their GCSEs. Fuller (1984) suggests that they may appear 'cool' in order to present a positive self-image to boys and teachers, but that they recognize the importance of getting good qualifications.

Children of 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 role models and material advantages. Their culture is perceived more positively by teachers than that of, for example, African-Caribbean males. 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 (Wanless Report 2007), Black pupils:

- are significantly more likely to be permanently excluded and routinely punished more harshly
- are praised less and told off more often
- are 1.5 times as likely as White British pupils to be identified with behaviour-related special needs
- outperformed White pupils in school entry tests (but when these were changed to teacher observations, the pattern was reversed)
- are disproportionately put in bottom sets – due to behaviour rather than ability
- are much less likely than the average to be identified as gifted and talented.

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

Table 3.1 Percentage of pupils entitled to a Free School Meal (FSM) by ethnicity

Ethnic group	per cent entitled to FSM
White British	12.8
Mixed heritage	25.2
Indian	13.7
Pakistani	38.2
Bangladeshi	58.5
African-Caribbean	26.2
Black African	41.4
Any other group	29.6

Source: Strand, S. (2007)

followed by Pakistani pupils with a gain of 22 percentage points.

However, the length of time Asian immigrant groups have lived in Britain varies. A study by Haque and Bell (2001), showed that recent arrival into the UK had a significant negative effect on performance (by the equivalent of more than one level in each core subject). Like social class and recent arrival, as we saw in Topic 2, parental education is a significant influence on their children's achievement, in particular the level of the mother's education. However, while 83 per cent of Bangladeshi parents have no qualifications, compared with 16 per cent of White British parents, the children of those who have been here longer achieve more highly in the education system. This is because older siblings, educated here, are able to help their younger brothers and sisters. Also, as we have seen, reflecting changes within the White community, females generally tend to perform better than males within each ethnic group (see Topic 4).

However, when compared to Whites, minority ethnic groups have a larger proportion of members with working-class backgrounds in higher education. This is particularly true for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis – nearly two-thirds of the entrants to higher education from these groups came from households headed by manual workers or the unemployed (Modood 2004).

Some African-Caribbean pupils have very high attainment and make excellent progress. On the other hand, some White British pupils have extremely low attainment, particularly those from economically disadvantaged groups, and make poor progress. For example, national statistics highlight the fact that only 24 per cent of White British boys entitled to FSM achieved 5 or more GCSE grades at A* to C compared to 27 per cent of African-Caribbean boys entitled to FSM (DfES 2007). Also, White British working-class pupils in inner-city areas have recently emerged as the group making the least progress over the secondary phase.

Strand: Indian and African-Caribbean pupils

Highlighting a relatively long-term trend, Strand (2007) focuses on two ethnic groups of particular interest, as both vary considerably in terms of progress throughout the first four years of secondary school, relative to their White

British 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:

- high parental and pupil educational aspirations
- undertaking high levels of homework
- low levels of truanting, exclusion, or social services/Educational Welfare Service 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 the African-Caribbean group. Relative to 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, as is the case for Indian pupils. In terms of social class and mother's educational qualifications, however, African-Caribbean pupils do not differ markedly from White British pupils. In addition, African-Caribbean pupils (and their parents) have higher educational aspirations, have a more positive attitude 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 (in addition to their lower level of achievement) much more likely to have identified special 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, more favourable balance of advantage/disadvantage relative to Indian pupils, Strand concludes that it is difficult to explain the poor progress of the African-Caribbean group.

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

Cultural factors

African-Caribbean underachievement has been blamed on the high numbers of one-parent families in African-Caribbean communities (57 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, which they suggest may account for the high percentage of African-Caribbeans in special schools. For girls, on the other hand, the role model provided by a strong, independent single mother is a motivating influence, and this helps to explain their relative success in education. Living in a single-parent household is not necessarily a cause of low attainment where it occurs, but according to Strand, it is a significant risk factor. Single-parent households have, on average, lower income, greater levels of parental stress and less time for educational input to the child, all of which may impact negatively on educational attainment. However, although a higher number of African-Caribbeans 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 difference may cause problems in doing schoolwork and communicating with teachers, leading to disadvantage at school.

Ball (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 English-language skills.

Issues such as uniform (which markets a school well and fosters an impression of discipline) may disrupt teacher-pupil relationships, particularly between teachers and ethnic-minority pupils whose cultural influences may exert more pressure on them to subvert the formal dress codes of the school, e.g. by refusing to remove baseball caps. This may provoke more antischool behaviour, truancy and the constructive exclusion of 'problem children'. Gewirtz (2002) identifies further socially exclusive practices, such as 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 generalize about ethnicity and educational achievement and reveals some of the complex links between social class, gender and ethnicity. But the factors identified above only focus on the home environment and culture of ethnic groups. We need to look at the processes and relationships that occur 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. Gillborn (1990) found that African-Caribbean pupils were more likely to be given detentions than other pupils. This was because the teachers interpreted (or misinterpreted) the dress and manner of speech of African-Caribbean pupils as representing a challenge to their authority. In perceiving their treatment to be unfair, the pupils responded, understandably, in accordance with their labels. Tony Sewell (1996) claimed that many teachers were fearful of Black boys in school, the result of socialization into stereotypical assumptions. Jasper (2002) goes further to suggest that the expectations that White female teachers have of Black boys' behaviour dictate the form and style of the teaching that they offer them, a style less conducive to learning than they offer to other groups. O'Donnell (1991) showed how the various ethnic

Focus on research

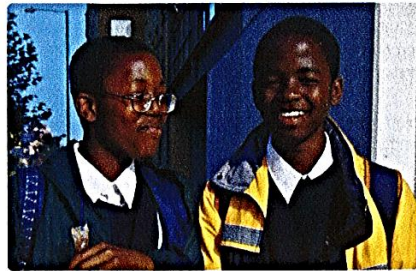
Tony Sewell Black masculinities and schooling

Tony Sewell (1996) conducted research in comprehensive schools in London. The bulk of the study took place in what Sewell refers to as 'Township School'. This school was a boys' comprehensive for children aged 11 to 16. There were 61 students of Asian origin, 63 of African origin, 140 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 'chill'.

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.

Adapted from Blundell, J. and Griffiths J. (2002) *Sociology since 1995 vol. 2*, Lewes: Connect Publications



- 1 Why do sociologists such as Sewell often change the names of the schools in which they conduct research?
- 2 Why was it important for Sewell to make good relationships and 'chill' with the boys?
- 3 To what extent did Sewell's own social identity help his relationships with the boys?
- 4 Do you think the boys would have been completely honest with Sewell? Explain your answer.
- 5 What are the dangers for a researcher in identifying too strongly with the group being studied?

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 status and recognition through other means. Indians show their anger, but do not tend to reject the education system. Instead, they succeed because they use the education system to their advantage.

According to Sewell (1996) and O'Donnell and Sharpe (2000), in responding to teacher's labels, racism and poor economic prospects, Black males construct a form of masculinity that earns respect from peers and females. This macho response may have little relevance for males in general with the 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 hood'. 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 knife 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 bleaker than those of other Asian groups. O'Donnell and Sharpe (2000) recognized that this macho 'warrior' perception by peers existed alongside perceptions of other Asian youths as 'weaklings' conforming to demands of the school or 'patriarchs', whose loyalty lay with the prescriptions of the male-dominated Asian family.

Connolly (1998) 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 as 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 confident. However, 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 6 year olds in a multi-ethnic, inner-city 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 teachers in one school tended to 'underplay the Black girls' educational achievements and focus on their

social behaviour'. Like their male counterparts, they were quite likely to be disciplined and punished, even though their behaviour did not always seem to justify it.

While few would argue that teachers display overt racism, Wright (1992) found considerable discrimination in the classroom. She observed Asian and African-Caribbean children in primary schools and found that teachers paid Asian pupils, especially girls, less attention. They involved them less in discussion and used simplistic language, assuming that they had a poor command of English. Teachers also lacked sensitivity towards aspects of their culture and displayed open disapproval of their customs and traditions. Teachers also made little effort to ensure that they pronounced names correctly, causing embarrassment and unnecessary ridicule. This had the effect of making the girls feel less positive towards the school. It also attracted hostility from other pupils, who picked up on the teachers' comments and attitude towards the Asian pupils. Despite this, teachers did have high expectations of Asian pupils with regard to academic success. According to Connolly (1998), South Asian girls, though generally successful in the education system, may be overlooked because of their perceived passivity, or they may feel marginalized and left out of **discourses** relating to intimacy, love and marriage because of stereotypical assumptions about Asian family life. Connolly also challenged the stereotypical assumptions many teachers made, noting that the behaviour of South Asian girls pointed towards a similar mix of work and avoidance of work and obedience and disruption, making their behaviour largely indistinguishable from that of their female peers. It would appear, therefore, that high expectations may to some extent be responsible for creating a self-fulfilling prophecy in terms of Asian girls' relative success.

Some evidence indicates that Black girls are antischool, but pro-education. They resent low teacher expectations and labelling, but are more determined to succeed than many other groups, especially Black boys. Both Fuller (1984) and Mirza (1992) have noted how Black girls respond to the failure of the school to address their needs by rejecting the help of teachers, which they regard as patronizing and, though sometimes well-meaning, misguided. For example, the girls were entered for fewer subjects 'to take the pressure off' or given ill-informed, often stereotypical careers advice. The girls respond outwardly by appearing to reject the values of the school through their dress, attitudes and behaviour. In terms of academic achievement, however, Fuller is more optimistic than Mirza about the outcomes and suggests that the strategies that they adopt in working with and helping each other enable them to succeed academically and prove their teachers wrong. In Mirza's study, on the other hand, rejection of teachers' help and limited involvement in lessons were seen to place them at a disadvantage academically, even though they preserved high self-esteem. They were not victims of overt racism or labelling, they were simply held back by the well-meaning but misguided behaviour of most of their teachers.

While teachers may have certain expectations of ethnic-minority groups, some of which may have been detrimental to their success, pupils of both Asian and African-Caribbean origin are, according to Connolly (1998), often victims of racism from White pupils. The impact of

Focus on research



Tikly et al. (2006) Aiming high

In 2003, the government set up a programme called 'Aiming 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 2006, a team of sociologists led by Leon 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, governors, 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.

Tikly, L. et al. (2006) *Evaluation of Aiming High: African Caribbean Achievement Project*, Bristol: University of Bristol

- 1 Identify the quantitative and qualitative methods used in this research.
- 2 What are the advantages and disadvantages of using postal questionnaires?
- 3 To what extent do you think the results of this research can be generalized to other schools?
- 4 What was the benefit for the schools who valued ethnic diversity?

this on educational commitment and performance is inevitably negative.

Other authors argue that racism, at least in the overt sense, cannot be a complete explanation for ethnic-group differences in attainment. Modood (2003) argues: 'If racism leads to the victim being turned off school and dropping out, why do Asian men and women have such high staying-on rates and make academic progress?' This does not discount the possibility of social stereotyping or **institutional racism** against some ethnic groups, but does highlight the importance of being sceptical with regard to generalized explanations.

The curriculum

Some sociologists have argued that the curriculum – what is taught in schools – actually disadvantages ethnic minorities. The knowledge that they encounter at school may not connect with 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 racial stereotypes. Coard (1971) showed how the content of education also ignored Black people. The people who are acclaimed tend 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 (1985) and Stone (1981), who noted that, despite feeling discriminated against by some teachers, African-Caribbean children had been able to maintain an extremely positive self-image.

Since the 1970s, some effort has been made to address the neglect of other cultures in the curriculum.

Multicultural 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 ('saris and samosas') and failing to address the real problem of racism. Ethnic-minority languages still do not have the same status as European languages, and schools are still required to hold Christian assemblies. The National Curriculum itself has also been criticized for being ethnocentric – especially in 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. Tikly *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 exasperated 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 (2002) 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 academic all underrate the abilities of Black children, relegating them to low-ability groups, a restricted curriculum and entry for lower-level exams. The increased marketization of schools (see Topic 6), has led to what some writers have called an 'A to C economy'. According to Gillborn and Youdell (1999) this creates a rationing of education, whereby teachers are forced to focus on those in danger of not realizing their potential for an above C grade. They thus neglect the no-hopers and high achievers, 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' needs 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/community service workers'.

Problems of categorization

Classifying according to ethnic origin is by no means simple. The term 'ethnic minorities', for example, includes many different groups and does not take account of class and gender differences within those groups. Gillborn and Gipps (1996) 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 (or anything else) in terms of broad categories such as class or ethnicity, and that the generalizations 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.

Material factors / Cultural factors / In school factors

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.*

Key terms

Anomaly an odd, peculiar, or strange condition, situation, quality, etc.

Discourse 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 emphasizing White middle-class culture at the expense of other cultures.

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

Multicultural education education that recognizes cultural diversity.

Service sector a group of economic activities loosely organized around finance, retail and personal care.

Material explanations of differential educational attainment by Ethnicity

Material explanations of differential educational attainment by Ethnicity

Points to argue	Supporting evidence	Opposing evidence

Cultural explanations of differential educational attainment by Ethnicity

Cultural explanations of differential educational attainment by Ethnicity

Points to argue	Supporting evidence	Opposing evidence

In school explanations of differential educational attainment by Ethnicity

In school (school processes) explanations of differential educational attainment by Ethnicity

Points to argue	Supporting evidence	Opposing evidence

Outline and assess the view that ethnic difference in educational achievement are caused by factors inside schools

PLAN

Dragon mother

Do your children have play dates, watch TV or ever get less than an A grade? If so, you're failing them as a parent, says Amy Chua

The Sunday Times Published: 9 January 2011

Amy Chua with her husband Jed and their two daughters, Sophia, right, and Lulu (TNL)

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, Not play 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 instruments 30 minutes every day. 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 businesspeople. As parents, they will be extremely strict and rabidly thrifty. ("Don't throw out those leftovers! Why are you using so much dishwasher 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 surpass 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 — not to let my family fall.

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 can 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.”

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.

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. The Chinese parent believes that their child will be strong enough to take the shaming and to improve from it. (And when Chinese kids do excel, there is plenty of ego-inflating praise lavished in the privacy of the home.) 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.

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(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 hottempered, 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 through 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.

When Jed and Sophia arrived home, they found Lulu contentedly soaking in a hot bath, dipping a brownie in a steaming cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows. But Lulu had underestimated me, too. I was just rearming.

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 flip 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. Afterward, 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.

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.