Do Our Beliefs about Children's Learning Discourage Our Children from Striving to Learn?

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This article draws on Grove's findings and conclusions from research for his books *The Aptitude Myth* (2013) and *The Drive to Learn* (2017). During 2017, an earlier version of this article appeared on an American website addressed to mothers.[1]

During our 250 years as a nation, many Americans have come to share a set of beliefs about how young children learn. If you think we do nothing but disagree about education, you'd be correct – but all those disagreements concern how schools *deliver* education. Now we're discussing beliefs about *how children learn*.

Typical of most Americans are these two beliefs about how children learn:

- A child's potentials[2] will emerge if the child has a wide range of experiences.
- A child will learn best if they explore and discover things on their own.

People in other world regions have different beliefs. The beliefs about learning typical of East Asians – Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans – have been extensively studied over 50 years. Might it be useful for us to look into what *they* believe about how children learn best? After all, East Asian children are legendary for excelling in classroom learning, as demonstrated by every set of international comparative test scores since around 1970.[3]

Americans' Beliefs about a Child's Potentials: We American parents wonder what we can do so that our youngster's inborn potentials and abilities will emerge and then can be supported. Most of us plan to provide a wide range of experiences, a few of which will, hopefully, draw out his or her latent potentials.

But what if the whole notion of "potentials" actually is *limiting*?

We Americans view a potential as a possibility for future excellence in terms of *type* (athletics? science? music?) and *strength* (better than classmates? world class?). A newborn's potentials are unknown at first, so we parents must remain vigilant to detect them as they surface. This belief depicts each potential as (a) inborn, (b) fixed in terms of type and strength, and (c) waiting to be awakened and revealed by experiences.

We often encourage a child to "live up to your full potential." A phrase like that portrays potential as *a so-far-unknown maximum level of ability* that the child should strive for. Here's an example: We say, "You're learning the violin. Are you good enough to get to Carnegie Hall?" (Implied: "Or are you merely good enough to play in you school's orchestra?") The implicit message is: If you ever reach your fixed, inborn, full potential for violin playing, striving for more excellence will be futile because *that's all the inborn potential you've got*.

East Asians' Beliefs about a Child's Potentials: East Asian parents hardly think at all about their child's inborn potentials. They're focused on something completely different. They view each young child as having a range of abilities that are *malleable* – capable of being shaped and trained to become ever more outstanding as the result of the child's effort, under his or her parents' direction.

It's about the child's day-to-day effort, not about abilities given by the accident of birth. His effort is under his, and his parents', control. How far his expertise takes him isn't portrayed as having a maximum because no one believes that abilities are fixed at birth. A child's maximum is determined *by his persevering hard work*.

An American saying captures the East Asian perspective. A visitor to New York City asks, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" The answer: "Practice, practice, *practice!*"

Americans' Beliefs about How a Child Learns Best: American parents believe the best way for children to learn is by trial-and-error exploration, enabling them to discover for themselves how things work. This belief foregrounds our individualistic mindset, which leads us to strongly value self-reliance and self-determination.

When toddlers are puzzling through the steps of a basic skill, such as dropping differently shaped blocks through variously shaped holes, we typically watch and encourage them. Only infrequently do we instruct, demonstrate, or correct their errors. When the child finally begins to get it right, our praise is lavish.

This parental pattern continues beyond early childhood into the school years. Most parents show interest in their child's academic progress, but our stance is one of observing and encouraging, sometimes disciplining (if, say, homework isn't done). It's unusual for American parents, in any sustained way, to directly participate in their child's learning by instructing, demonstrating, drilling, or diagnosing errors.

East Asians' Beliefs about How a Child Learns Best: East Asians' think differently. They view parents as responsible for, and in control of, their children's learning, not only during their early years but also while they're in school. They don't limit themselves to encouraging effort, cheering if outcomes are good, and preserving self-esteem if they're not. Instead, *they directly participate in their child's learning*.

For example, if it's about dropping blocks through holes, East Asian parents show the child *how to do it*. It's less about assisting via talk, more about demonstrating by holding and guiding the child's hand. That's what "directly participate" means. East Asian parents take responsibility by actively – even manually – guiding and demonstrating. In the case of school-age children, parents drill, quiz, and even assign their own homework to keep their child ahead of the class. They serve as *academic coaches and trainers*, not as cheerleaders.

Decades of reforms have altered how American schools deliver education, yet our children have made little or no progress toward improved learning. The East Asian experience tells us that what most needs reforming is not our schools but rather what Americans, and especially us parents, *believe* about how children learn.

Do Our Beliefs Discourage Our Children from Striving to Learn? Ethnologists of education such as myself compare children's learning in different societies, seeking insights. The question posed by this article's title came to mind because of insights gained from contrasting common beliefs of Americans and East Asians.

Take a moment to mull over the implications for children's learning of these two society's beliefs about potentials and how children learn best. Some who ponder these comparisons reach an upsetting conclusion: Our American beliefs and consequent behavior, although not directly discouraging our children from striving to learn, do fall short of the possibilities demonstrated by many parents and citizens of East Asian nations.

More about *The Aptitude Myth: How an Ancient Belief Came to Undermine Children's Learning Today* is at theaptitudemyth.info.

More about *The Drive to Learn: What the East Asian Experience Tells Us about Raising Students Who Excel* is at thedrivetolearn.info.

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[1] Under the title "Alternative Ways to Think about How Our Children Learn," an earlier version of this article appeared during 2017 on the website Reading with Frugal Mom at readingwithfrugalmom.com.

[2] I'm using the plural "potentials" because use of "potential" could imply that I believe each child has only one.

[3] The best-known of the international comparative tests is PISA, Program for International Student Assessment. Much information is available on the web about these tests. I suggest beginning with Wikipedia, which includes easy-to-read comparative tables going back to 2000: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Programme_for_International_Student_Assessment.