

## < Struggle For Smarts? How Eastern And Western Cultures Tackle Learning

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This is MORNING EDITION, from NPR News. Good morning. I'm Renee Montagne.

Today in Your Health, how different cultures think about the experience of struggling with school work. Psychologists have taken an interest in that, because they say attitudes towards struggle can have big implications. NPR's Alix Spiegel reports on comparisons between learning in the U.S. and learning in Eastern cultures like Japan and China.

ALIX SPIEGEL, BYLINE: In 1979, when psychologist Jim Stigler was still a graduate student studying teaching, he went on a trip to Japan to do some research and found himself sitting in the back row of a crowded fourth grade math class.

JIM STIGLER: The teacher was trying to teach the class how to draw three dimensional cubes on paper. And one kid was just totally having trouble with it. His cube looked all cock-eyed. So the teacher said to him: You know, why don't you go put yours on the board? Right there, I thought, that's interesting. He took the one who can't do it and told him to go put it on the board.

SPIEGEL: In America, it's usually the best kid in the class who's invited to the board. So the kid came up very dutifully, started drawing, but couldn't make the cube work. Every couple minutes, the teacher would ask the rest of the class whether the kid had gotten it right, and the class would shake their heads no. And as this went on, Stigler noticed that he, Stigler - who, by the way, is now a professor at UCLA - anyway, he, Stigler, was getting more and more and more anxious.

STIGLER: I was sitting there starting to perspire, because I was really empathizing for this kid. And I thought: This kid's going to break into tears. But then I realized, he didn't break into tears. He just kept up there. And at the end of the class, he did make his cube look right, and the teacher said to the class, how does that look class? And they all looked up and said he did it.

SPIEGEL: Then the class broke into applause, and the kid smiled a huge smile and sat down, clearly proud of himself - which, Stigler says, got him thinking about a lot of things, but in particular about how these two cultures - East and West - approach the experience of intellectual struggle.

STIGLER: From very early ages, we see struggle as an indicator that you're just not very smart. It's a sign of low ability. People who are smart don't struggle. They just naturally get it. It's our folk theory. Whereas, in Asian cultures, they tend to see struggle more as an opportunity.

SPIEGEL: In Eastern cultures, it's just assumed that struggle is a predictable part of the learning process. Everyone is expected to struggle. And, in a way, struggling is a chance to show that you have what it takes emotionally to overcome the problem by having the strength to persist through that struggle.

STIGLER: They've taught them that suffering can be a good thing.

SPIEGEL: Now, granting that there is plenty of diversity in these two cultures and it's possible to point to counterexamples within each, the question still remains: Why, in general, do these two cultures see the experience of intellectual struggle so very differently?

Jin Li is a professor at Brown University, who, like Stigler, compares East and West. And for the last 10 years, she's been recording conversations between American mothers and their children and Taiwanese mothers and their children, and then analyzing those conversations to understand how the mothers talk to their kids about learning.

(SOUNDBITE OF RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: Guess what? We had a Harriet Tubman book.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: You really like Harriet Tubman, too, huh?  
UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: Mm-hmm.

SPIEGEL: This is one of Li's recordings. In it, an American mother talks to her eight-year-old son about school. The son is a great student who loves to learn. He tells his mother that he and his friends talk about books even during recess. And the mother responds with this.

(SOUNDBITE OF RECORDING)

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

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: I know.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: ...they just keep...

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: Talk about books.

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

SPIEGEL: It is a small exchange, a moment, but in this drop of conversation, there is a whole world of cultural assumptions and beliefs. Essentially, the American mother, Li says, is communicating to her son that the cause of her son's success in school is his intelligence. He is smart - which, Li says, is a very common American view.

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

SPIEGEL: But most people in Asian cultures, she says, don't think this way. Academic success is not as much about whether a student is smart. Academic success is about whether a student is willing to work and to struggle.

JIN LI: It resides in what they do, but not who they are.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: (Foreign language spoken)

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: (Foreign language spoken)

SPIEGEL: This is another conversation, this time between a Taiwanese mother and her nine-year-old son. They are talking about the piano. The boy won first place in a competition and the mother is trying to explain to him why.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: (Foreign language spoken)

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

LIN: So the focus is on the process of persisting through it, despite the challenges; not giving up, and that leads to the success.

SPIEGEL: So all this is important because the way that you conceptualize the act of struggling with something profoundly affects your actual behavior. Obviously, if struggle indicates weakness to you - for example a lack of intelligence - it makes you feel bad, so you're less likely to put up with it. But if struggle indicates strength - the ability to face down challenge - you are much more willing to accept it.

And Stigler says in the real world it's easy to see the consequences of these different interpretations.

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

SPIEGEL: So the American first graders that Stigler studied...

STIGLER: ...worked on it less than 30 seconds on average, and then they basically looked at us and said, we haven't had this.

SPIEGEL: But the Japanese students?

STIGLER: Every one of them worked for the entire hour on the impossible problem and finally we had to stop the session because the hour was up.

SPIEGEL: Now I don't mean to imply with any of this that the Eastern way of interpreting struggle - or anything else - is better than the Western way, or vice versa. Each have their strengths and their

weaknesses, which both side know. Westerners tend to worry that their kids won't be able to compete against Asian kids who excel in many areas, but especially in math and science. And Eastern cultures - Jin Li says - have their own set of worries.

LIN: Well, our children are not creative. Our children don't have individuality. They're just robots. You hear the educators from Asian countries express that concern a lot.

SPIEGEL: Which led me to this question: Is it possible for one culture to adopt the beliefs of a different culture if we see that that culture is producing better results?

LIN: Yes. I think it's possible but it requires very big effort.

STIGLER: It's hard to do anything that changes culture, but it can be done. For example, could we change our views of learning and place more of an emphasis on struggle? Yeah.

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

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

SPIEGEL: But we can, Stigler says.

In the meantime, he and the other psychologists doing this work say there are more differences to map - differences that might be able to help both cultures see more clearly who they are and how they might help our children.

Alix Spiegel, NPR News, Washington.

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