

# Disadvantaged children's struggles at school have 'little to do' with character, attitude or a lack of 'growth mindset'

December 18 2023

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

The relative underperformance of disadvantaged students at school has little to do with them lacking the "character," attitude, or mindset of their wealthier peers, despite widespread claims to the contrary, new research indicates.

The findings are published in *Sociology of Education*.

The study, which analyzed data from more than 240,000 15-year-olds across 74 countries, challenges the view often invoked by politicians and educators that cultivating self-belief or "growth mindsets" can reduce class-based learning gaps. Researchers found that no more than 9% of the substantial [achievement](#) gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students can be attributed to differences in these social and emotional characteristics.

In almost every country in the world, wealth and [socioeconomic status](#) significantly predicts children's academic success. The new study, by academics from the Universities of Cambridge, Zürich and Tübingen, does not dispute that social and [emotional learning](#) positively shapes academic outcomes, but it does question whether it can substantially reduce the academic achievement gap between children from rich and poor families.

This contradicts a widespread conviction among education policymakers. One [influential policy paper](#) in the US, for example, has identified "promoting social-emotional and character development" as a key strategy for narrowing the achievement gap. Similarly, a [UK Cabinet Office survey](#) in 2015 concluded that disadvantaged and [vulnerable children](#) would benefit most from social and emotional learning, and that neglecting this would "perpetuate the cycle of advantage or disadvantage across generations."

In some countries, social and emotional learning is also big business. The industry was valued at \$1.5 billion in the US in 2020, and projected to reach \$3.9 billion by 2025. Many of these providers also suggest that their services can help to narrow the achievement gap.

The lead author of the new study, Dr. Rob Gruijters, from the Research

for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge, said, "Educational inequality cannot be solved through social and emotional learning. The idea that children can overcome structural disadvantage by cultivating a growth mindset and a positive work ethic overlooks the real constraints many disadvantaged students face, and risks blaming them for their own misfortune."

Nicolas Hübner, Assistant Professor at the Institute of Education at the University of Tübingen and a co-author, said, "Developing social and emotional skills is hugely valuable for children, but the evidence suggests it has little to do with why low income students are more likely to struggle academically. According to our results, it is not a magic bullet for tackling the socioeconomic achievement gap."

The study used data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), covering 248,375 [high school students](#) in 74 countries. Researchers analyzed both the science test scores, and school-relevant socio-emotional skills, of the most and least advantaged quartile (25%) of students in each country.

Across all 74 countries, the socioeconomic attainment gap was very large. The average difference in PISA science test results between the top and bottom 25% of students sorted by socioeconomic status was 70.5 points; equivalent to almost three years of schooling.

The academic benefits that disadvantaged children derive from socio-emotional skills, however, were found to be relatively similar to those gained by advantaged children. This runs counter to the widely held assumption that focusing on these skills is particularly important and beneficial for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, which underpins many social and emotional learning programs.

While children from wealthier backgrounds were found to have somewhat higher levels of socio-emotional skills on average, the impact of these discrepancies on the overall achievement gap was modest. The researchers calculated that if, hypothetically, disadvantaged children had the same social and emotional skills as wealthier children and their academic effects were consistent, the learning gap between them would only reduce by no more than 9%.

Strikingly, these findings proved fairly consistent across countries and for different academic subjects (reading, math and science).

One of the reasons why socio-emotional skills are not a major driver of achievement inequality is that despite the differences between them, both advantaged and disadvantaged children were found to have reasonably high levels of these skills overall. For example, during the PISA psychometric assessment, 84% of disadvantaged [children](#), and 90% from the advantaged quartile, agreed with the statement "I feel proud that I have accomplished things."

The researchers add that the 9% of the achievement gap that can be attributed to the social and [emotional skills](#) measured by PISA is likely to be an overestimation, because of potential reverse causality in the relationship with academic achievement. Co-author Isabel Raabe, a researcher in the Department of Sociology, University of Zürich, said, "Students who lack the right mindset may perform less well at school, but that may be because their academic performance has eroded their self-belief; not the other way round."

The authors argue that policies to reduce educational disadvantages should focus on the structural reasons that cause some students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to underperform. These include differences in the quality, resourcing and funding of the schools they attend; the absence in many countries of high-quality preschool options;

and a lack of extracurricular resources and out-of-school opportunities compared with their wealthier peers.

**More information:** Socio-Emotional Skills and the Socioeconomic Achievement Gap, *Sociology of Education* (2023).

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Disadvantaged children's struggles at school have 'little to do' with character, attitude or a lack of 'growth mindset' (2023, December 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-disadvantaged-children-struggles-school-character.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.