

World View Book of the Year

Outliers: The Story of Success by Malcolm Gladwell
Little, Brown and Company, 2008

Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*, discusses the story of success in his third non-fiction best-seller, *Outliers*. Gladwell's main argument in *Outliers* is that "there is something profoundly wrong with the way we make sense of success." Rather than crediting ambition, ability, hard work, or some combination of the three, Gladwell believes that circumstances, cultural influences, and luck have more to do with an individual's ability to achieve extraordinary success.

Gladwell argues his point by exploring a variety of examples from around the world and throughout time. These compelling stories range from the impact that cultural norms have on airline pilots in Korea and Colombia to the string of events that enabled Bill Gates to revolutionize computing as we know it. He also reminds us of the serious implications that our beliefs about success have on education.

He begins the book with a discussion about a type of success that should be easy to explain – professional sports. As far as most of us are concerned, professional athletes achieve success because of a combination of ability and hard work. Both of those components play a part, but Gladwell argues that other factors, particularly month of birth, come into play. He points to the research of a psychologist who found that Canadian hockey players who were born in the first part of the year (January – March) more often reach the professional level. He traces this back to Canadian youth hockey leagues, which have a January 1st cut-off date for enrollment. Children who are born closest to that date will often get placed on more advanced teams because their coaches confuse maturity with ability. This critical advantage at a young age provides them with the coaching and practice time they need to eventually advance to the highest level of play.

So what does this have to do with the education of our students? Gladwell notes out that school cutoff dates for entry into kindergarten create an inherently disadvantaged system for children who enter school at a younger age. Slightly older, and therefore more mature, students are often placed in gifted classes that teach advanced material. These types of opportunities at a young age may have lasting effects on these students' ability to achieve success.

Gladwell goes on to explore how cultural legacies affect education in America and China. Most American public schools adhere to a traditional schedule of relatively short school days and a long summer vacation. While not in school many children, especially poor children whose families cannot afford after-school and summer programs, forget much of what they learn. The American cultural mentality behind this schedule is a desire for "kids to be kids," which varies greatly from the Chinese attitude. China's cultural legacy, which is based on cultivating rice paddies, has fostered an attitude of intense hard work and little rest, not a fear of exhaustion.

Gladwell illustrates the effect that the Chinese work ethic can have on education in America by looking at the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). KIPP academies are middle schools that operate in many urban school systems across the United States. KIPP modifies the traditional American approach to schooling by opting for longer school days and years, which amounts to 50 to 60 percent more learning time. The result, even among the poorest students who attend KIPP, is increased understanding and retention of material. By mandating more hours of school and homework and adopting a cultural mentality that values work over play, KIPP schools give their students the opportunity to succeed.

The point Gladwell hopes readers will take away from *Outliers* is that we always owe something to chance, culture, and the opportunities we may or may not be given. The likelihood of becoming an outlier depends most on the legacy of our past and the circumstances we will face in the future.