

# Nature or Culture?

*The answer may be luck, genes, and more*

## Outliers: The Story of Success

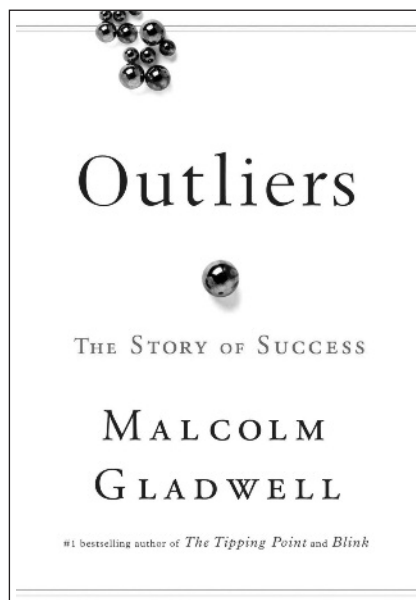
By Malcolm Gladwell

Little, Brown, and Company, 2008,  
\$27.99; 309 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Malcolm Gladwell, a writer for the *New Yorker*, has become wildly successful mining the findings of social scientists to support ideas or hypotheses that it turns out have been of interest to great numbers of readers. The hypotheses may not be very original or earth-shaking to social scientists themselves—for example, that one can find circumstances in which some phenomenon that has plugged along suddenly undergoes a rapid change (*The Tipping Point*), or that an idea or plan that comes in a flash may be as good as something developed with a great deal of research and much thought (*Blink*), or that success may be based more on special opportunities and hard work than on native gifts (the current *Outliers*). No matter: *The Tipping Point*, as I write, has been on the *New York Times* nonfiction best-seller list for 230 weeks, *Blink* for 72 weeks, and *Outliers* high on the new nonfiction list for 15 weeks. And Gladwell has become an enormously successful and well-paid speaker to business groups.

His current book is of particular interest to educators because, as its subtitle tells us, it is “The Story of Success,” and much of it deals with success in education. It fits well with the current widely accepted dogma that “all children can learn,” because it downgrades the role of high native intelligence as indicated by IQ tests, and is optimistic that we can close current gaps in achievement by class and ethnic group by properly applying research on what leads to



educational success. So it takes on both native gifts and unmodifiable cultural background as explanations of differential educational achievement and the kinds of success in life that higher education makes possible.

Gladwell is a wonderful storyteller and he cannot resist telling a good story, even if it is only marginally related to his central thesis. So he begins *Outliers* with the story of the town of Roseto in Pennsylvania, settled by immigrants from the town of the same name in Italy and still peopled by them and their descendants. Roseto has remarkably low rates of heart disease and has been studied by a physician and medical scientist, Stewart Wolf, and a sociologist, John Bruhn, who concluded that neither diet nor exercise nor genes nor location explains this anomaly: it was a family- and church-based lifestyle, “culture,” we might say. The connection to success? Well, it is certainly success in living, if not in education and occupation and profession. There is no indication

that Rosetans do well by these measures, and their deep attachment to family and native place suggest otherwise. But “cultural legacy,” as Gladwell puts it, does come up again in the book and becomes one of the factors that do explain success in the wider world.

Consider a KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) school in the Bronx. The children come from circumstances that lead regularly to academic failure and dropping out, but in this school they do very well indeed. By the end of 8th grade, 84 percent of the students perform at or above grade level, compared to a figure for the district schools in the area of 16 percent. “KIPP is...an organization that has succeeded by taking the idea of cultural legacies seriously.”

Huh? What can he possibly mean, one asks, since this is a school of black and Hispanic children, whose “cultural legacies” have not ordinarily been thought of as education-enhancing? It is a complex connection. The story of KIPP follows a fascinating chapter on the culture of the rice paddies of southern China. Rice, contrasted with wheat, for example, demands very hard and steady work almost year-round. This has influenced, we are left to conclude, the educational culture in rice-growing societies. While the U. S. school year comprises about 180 days, South Korea’s has 220 days, Japan’s 243. And while there is no indication that the founders of KIPP knew anything about this, they too believe that steady and very hard work will bring success. So they run Saturday and summer classes, and a long school day, which means the KIPP children spend 50 or 60 percent more time in school than the typical public-school student in this country. It shows. But this use of “cultural heritage” as an explanation is a stretch.

A rigorous or systematic reader may find many a hole in the chains whereby Gladwell makes his case, but the stories along the way are wonderful. Along with gaining insight into the hard work of the rice paddy, we learn there is something special about the Chinese number system: first, each word for a number is very short, and it seems memory of numbers—from research Gladwell reports—is affected by the length of time it actually takes to sound out the number. In addition, the Chinese number system is very regular: there are no illogical jumps, as English has in its second decile, from twelve (for 12) to thirteen (for 13). Chinese numbers are a direct copy of the numerical system. I never knew those facts and find them intriguing; and indeed they may play a role, along with the long school days, in the superiority in mathematics of East Asian schoolchildren. But then one thinks, don't all the Chinese kids in Stuyvesant High School in New York City use English in doing their mathematics?

Gladwell's account of why a Korean airline had a series of horrendous crashes and how it overcame them is the longest in the book. It seems in Korean culture it wouldn't do to interrupt a superior, and Korean pilots had to be taught to do this to prevent the captain from ignoring a danger that was obvious to an underling. The incentive to change was enormous: the airline would have failed if it hadn't better managed to prevent disastrous accidents. Presumably, we are to conclude that other deep-lying cultures can also be changed. But this coheres uneasily with his main thesis.

In fact, Gladwell is riding two horses when it comes to the story of success. One emphasizes accident—for example, that Bill Gates had access to a computer

in 1968 when there were few around and to another more advanced one at the University of Washington when it was not easy to spend endless time free on a computer, and this helped make him what he became. But the other horse is culture, even though Gladwell seems to argue that its effects, when they contradict success, can be changed. So the story of a group of very successful Jewish lawyers in New York not only points to the period when they were born, a time of low birth rates, which meant that the New York City public schools they attended were uncrowded and gave a good education,

but also to a Jewish propensity to seek out and seize opportunity.

And his own success? Gladwell ends with the story of his Jamaican grandparents, who were school teachers and whose daughter managed to get to England for an education, where she met and married an English mathematician, whose son is Malcolm Gladwell. Heritage, opportunity, accident, maybe genes after all? He leaves it to the reader to sort out.

*Nathan Glazer is professor emeritus of education and sociology at Harvard University.*

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