

Study after study ranks schoolchildren in Japan and other developed Asian countries among the best in the world, particularly on standardized tests of mathematics and science. American high school students, meanwhile, have slipped somewhere below those in Greece, Lithuania, Taiwan and Singapore in advanced mathematics and science. Given the deep cultural differences, it is not clear which parts of the Asian formula could work in other countries such as America. Japan's prowess in academic achievement is also sustained by something it does not have: ethnic and linguistic diversity. Such discipline is not imposed by fearsome teachers, according to Catherine Lewis, an expert on the Japanese educational system and a senior researcher at Mills College. At the same time, in Japan some children strive hard to excel partly because they become burdened early on by the fear of failing. Instead, students are honoured to be chosen to lead lessons, and they take turns calling the class to order, experiencing firsthand what it is like to quieten down an unruly group of students. As a result, teachers manage the class by relying on the cumulative general power of self reflection, rather than by punishing and rewarding, Lewis explains.