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Stanford education researcher finds that adolescents who are religiously engaged do better in school. (Photo: franckreporter/iStock)

Religiously engaged adolescents demonstrate habits that help them get better grades, Stanford scholar finds

Study suggests that being religious helps adolescents get better grades because they are rewarded for being conscientious and cooperative.

April 15, 2018 By Carrie Spector

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Adolescents who practice religion on a regular basis do better in school than those who are religiously disengaged, according to new research from Stanford Graduate School of Education (GSE).

The findings indicate that religious communities socialize adolescents to cultivate two habits highly valued in public schools: conscientiousness and cooperation. Religious engagement may influence grades more than researchers realize.

“The United States is a highly religious country, and religion is a powerful social force,” said the study’s author, Ilana Horwitz, a doctoral candidate at the GSE. “If we, as education scholars, are trying to understand adolescents in America, we should pay attention to this very important part of their life.”

Horwitz released the findings in a [working paper](#), “The Abider-Avoider Achievement Gap: The Association Between GPA and Religiosity in Public Schools,” at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association on April 15.

Race, class, gender—and religion

Religious engagement is typically ignored in studies on the relationship between social attributes and academic achievement, Horwitz said. But her research points to the possibility that religiosity plays a role similar to characteristics such as race, class and gender.

Half of American teenagers report that religious faith is “very” or “extremely” meaningful to them, and one in three teenagers prays at least once a day, she said.

To assess the role religiosity might have on middle and high school students’ grades, Horwitz analyzed survey and interview data collected by the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a 10-year longitudinal research project launched in 2002 by researchers at the University of Notre Dame and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to explore the influence of religion in the lives of American youth.

Her study sample comprised 2,491 teens (ages 13-17) attending public schools. Respondents and their parents were surveyed by phone about a range of personal and family characteristics, including grades and religious practices.

Horwitz assigned each respondent to one of five common “types” of religiosity using a classification system developed by sociologists Melinda Lundquist Denton and Lisa Pearce. At one end of the spectrum were *abiders*—those who attend religious services, pray on a regular basis, feel close to God, and emphasize the role of faith in their daily lives. On the other end of the spectrum were *avoiders*—those believe that a God exists but avoid religious involvement and broader issues of the relevance of religion for their life.

Abiders, Horwitz found, earned significantly better grades on average than the avoiders. Abiders had an average GPA of 3.22, compared with 2.93 among avoiders.

“Being religious helps adolescents in middle and high school because they are rewarded for being obedient and respectful and for having self-control,” Horwitz said.

Behaviors and dispositions

The link between religiosity and grades remained after accounting for race, class, gender and religious denomination, Horwitz said. It also held after controlling for certain behaviors associated with strict religious practice among teenagers, like lower alcohol consumption and limited sexual activity.

“Generally, kids who are religious drink less, have less sex, and are more closely supervised by their parents,” said Horwitz. “These variables explained some of why religious kids do better in school. But my models showed there’s something above and beyond those factors that the survey data couldn’t explain.”

To uncover what else might account for the difference, she turned to transcripts of in-person interviews NSYR researchers conducted with 30 of the original survey respondents—15 abiders and 15 avoiders. (Access to the transcripts also helped Horwitz confirm the reliability of students’ self-reported grades: She was able to compare individuals’ survey data with their subsequent interview responses and found both consistently aligned.)

The lengthy transcripts shed some light onto the unexplained gap between abiders’ and avoiders’ grades. In sharing stories about their lives, Horwitz said, abiders were much more likely to express conscientiousness and a cooperative disposition than avoiders, who were more likely to demonstrate rebelliousness and a lack of self-discipline.

“They weren’t specifically asked to provide examples of these traits in their interviews,” she said. “But the stories they shared, on a range of topics, revealed these traits.”

Which comes first?

Horwitz noted that her research indicated association, not causation—she found that religiosity is associated with, but doesn’t necessarily cause, higher grades.

She also acknowledged the “chicken and egg” quandary: Do kids who are raised to be religious become more conscientious as a result, or are conscientious kids more likely to become religious?

“During adolescence, religion isn’t really a choice,” she said. “Parents are largely choosing their children’s religious preferences, so it’s unlikely that conscientious kids are opting into religion.”

Horwitz said the findings contribute to a broader understanding of the many social factors associated with academic achievement.

“Although it’s well known that academic performance is correlated with income, my study suggests that good academic performance is also driven by habits learned through religious adherence,” Horwitz said.

This raises an important question, she added: Are schools striving to promote obedience, and if so, does that get in the way of cultivating creativity and critical thinking? In the next stage of her work, Horwitz will examine whether the academic advantage that abiders have in public school persists as they transition into higher education.

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