

# WBL Update

Winter 2008/09 [www.learningbenefits.net](http://www.learningbenefits.net)

## A time of change for WBL

➔ Welcome to our latest newsletter, at a time of transition for WBL. Since 1999 the Centre has been in receipt of generous funding from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). That period is now drawing to a close – over the course of 2009, the Centre's funding base will change with extensive support from the Institute of Education to supplement the work we are increasingly undertaking for non-Government as well as Government bodies.

Amongst the more interesting recent awards are: a one-year project with CEDEFOP (the agency promoting the development of vocational education and training (VET) in the European Union) to explore the social benefits of VET for individuals in a European context; and, in the light of the Every Child Matters agenda, a seven-year project to evaluate the outcomes of the Mulberry Bush School in Oxfordshire. This is a school which provides specialist therapeutic care, treatment and education to severely emotionally troubled children aged five to twelve.

Publications continue apace, and include:

- *Research Report 27, Determinants of aspirations*, Leslie Morrison Gutman and Rodie Akerman;
- *Research Report 28, The influence of context on attainment in primary school: interactions*

*between children, family and school contexts*, Kathryn Duckworth;

- *Research Report 29, The importance of social worlds: an investigation of peer relationships*, Leslie Morrison Gutman and John Brown;
- *The impact of lifelong learning on happiness and well-being, Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning*, Sabates, R. and Hammond, C. (2008);
- *The impact of lifelong learning on poverty reduction, Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning*, Sabates, R. (2008).

One further publication merits special attention. We recently launched our summary report on the work of the Centre over the last ten years: *The social and personal benefits of learning: a summary of key research findings*. Speakers at the launch included one of the co-founders of WBL, Professor John Bynner, and my predecessor, Professor Leon Feinstein. We were pleased to see numerous representatives from policy, research and practice. See the article on page 4 for further details.

There have recently been some changes to our team. We have recruited a new Quantitative Research Officer, Polina Obolenskaya. Dr Ricardo Sabates has resigned as WBL's NIACE Research Fellow to take up a new post at the University of Sussex. I am delighted to say, however, that the resulting vacancy has been taken up by Dr Andrew Jenkins. Andrew has worked at the Institute of

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Education for many years, including at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies and the Centre for the Economics of Education. Dr Ruth Lupton has resigned to take up a new post at the London School of Economics. She will be continuing her work on social housing for WBL and will remain a presence at the centre until February 2009. Following Ruth's resignation, WBL received support from the Institute of Education to recruit for a new post of Professor in Quantitative Social Science, to be based at the Centre. Details of the successful candidate will be announced shortly.

All in all an exciting phase in the life of WBL, and one which promises much for the future.

**John Vorhaus, Director of the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning.**

# An inside look at the secrets of council estates

➔ **Becky Tunstall of the London School of Economics is currently working on a project on social housing with colleagues in WBL. In her spare time she's writing a book called 'Estate Secrets' and here she allows us a sneak preview...**

The book is a longitudinal study – based on an unusual archive of varied longitudinal data on 20 British council housing estates, from drawing board to the present. It aims to assess and understand estate 'performance' over time and in context – and to dispel myths and uncover 'secrets' about social housing. Almost every imaginable aspect of estates' contexts have changed over time. For example, when in 1938 the Minister of Health did the council the honour of touring the site of one estate, he was offered a cigarette by a workman, "which he smilingly accepted", according to a local journalist who was there. You can't imagine a modern health secretary falling for that. Other contextual changes include the decline of the vegetable garden, the obsolescence of the gas iron, the rise of car ownership, and increasing ethnic diversity. However, the most significant change has been the developing size and social role of council housing in the national and local housing markets – first growing, then shrinking – and the evolving employment and class structure.

A once well-known fact that has become an estate 'secret' is that all the early and mid-generation estates initially stood out from much – and in some cases most – local housing, because they had basic amenities like hot water and fixed baths, as well as more innovative

features like electric wiring and plug sockets. However, this relative advantage was rapidly wiped out by rising standards across local and national housing systems, and late generation estates were not able to offer much advantage on these basics.

All the estates, of course, aged over time. However, the main reason that estates were not able at least to keep up with rising standards was that most experienced decades of almost nil reinvestment. One of the first residents of an estate built in the 1930s recalled: "By the conditions that operated in housing generally at that time we felt we were in rather elite types of houses." But by 1995, when the estate was 57 years old, a manager said: "Some properties are completely unmodernised. This has caused general dissatisfaction and resentment." Even in 2005, there were still a few homes at the estate with outside toilets!

The most basic measure of 'performance' of all is whether homes and estates managed to escape demolition or physical collapse. Detailed data on building survival rates are rare for any type of building, and have not been pieced together before for British council housing. More than half the estates have lost some homes to demolition. Multi-storey car parks and other buildings have also replaced housing.

The book will also track the mix of residents in the estates over time. The bar chart below shows the number and composition of residents of just one street in one estate, from the 1931 census, when the estate was aged just 5 years, to 1991, when it was aged 65. It shows both overall



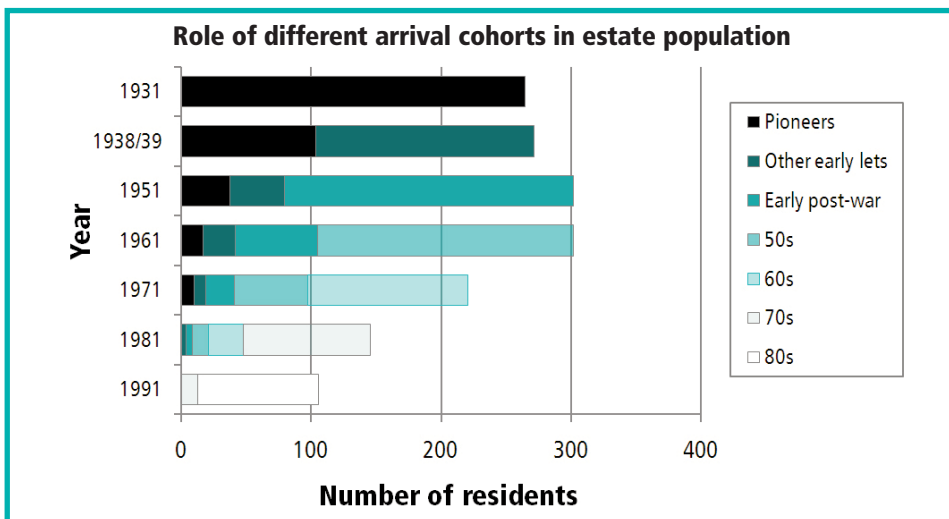
"The most basic measure of performance is whether homes managed to escape demolition or physical collapse."

numbers of residents, and the proportion of people resident in any one year who had arrived at different times in the past.

Overall resident numbers rose in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, as the young families who were the first tenants grew and matured. This is a normal – if not well-known – neighbourhood process. What was different in this estate was that numbers then dropped off from the 1960s as adult children left and older residents died – and weren't fully replaced. Young families both wanted to and could go elsewhere. By the 1980s not all homes had tenants. The new residents who did arrive in this period had particularly high rates of unemployment and other problems, and most did not stay long.

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**Discussion provides a forum for people outside WBL to voice their ideas and opinions. If you would like to respond to this Discussion piece or contribute an article to the the Spring 2009 newsletter, please contact Lorna Hardy at [l.hardy@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:l.hardy@ioe.ac.uk).**



## Recently published

● Since the last issue of WBL Update, the Centre has published several research papers. All of these papers are available to download from: [www.learningbenefits.net/publications/ResearchReports.htm](http://www.learningbenefits.net/publications/ResearchReports.htm)

### Determinants of Aspirations

Research Report No. 27, by Leslie Morrison Gutman and Rodie Akerman

**“The greater failure is not the child who doesn’t reach the stars, but the child who has no stars that they feel they are reaching for.” Gordon Brown (2007)**

Do high aspirations lead to better outcomes? Who has high aspirations, and how can the development of high aspirations best be supported? In this report we review the current research literature to consider how educational and career aspirations are formed in response to different circumstances, and discuss the implications for current policies and practices.

We find that aspirations begin to be shaped early in a child’s life, but are modified by experience. Aspirations tend to decline as children mature, in response to their growing understanding of the world and what is possible, and to constraints imposed by previous choices and achievements, such as leaving school or becoming a parent.

Girls, young people from minority ethnic groups and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to hold higher aspirations, while parents from these groups tend to have higher aspirations for their children. Attitudes are also important: young people who believe they have the ability to achieve and who attribute their success to hard work rather than luck have higher aspirations than their peers.

In general, higher aspirations do lead to better outcomes, but this is not true for everyone. In particular, there is a gap between educational aspirations and achievement for some minority ethnic groups and a gap between girls’ aspirations and career attainment.

Since the early years of a child’s life are a key time for developing aspirations, work with parents is important; schools also have an important role, particularly when family resources are limited. Later, young people need easy access to advice, perhaps from a trusted individual such as a mentor if necessary. Involvement in positive activities may also encourage high aspirations.

### The influence of context on attainment in primary school: Interactions between children, family and school contexts

Research Report No. 28, by Kathryn Duckworth

Recent years have seen a growing disquiet about the quality of the lives of children and young people in the UK and elsewhere. Concern focuses both on well-being itself and also on the consequences of poor quality childhood for later outcomes. Increasing awareness of the importance of parents and the home environment in shaping children’s achievement, coupled with the recognition of the school as a site for engagement in broader aspects of social and personal development, has raised interest in the interactions between these different influences as a way of addressing issues of educational attainment and inequality.

This study explores the nature of these links and considers the relative contribution of different aspects of four ‘contexts’ or likely spheres of influence on pupil achievement in England at Key Stage 2 (age 10/11), as well as their associations with one another. The results indicate that the quality of each aspect of their lives is important for children’s attainment in primary school: pupils with better contexts – i.e. better individual, school and family background and experience – have higher scores in Key Stage 2 assessments in English, maths and science. However, these contexts do not act in isolation, but are closely related to one another, and their influence on children’s attainment is affected by these interrelationships.

The findings further suggest that where influence is possible, the greatest likely returns are for those whose background and experience are poor. The aspects explored in this report indicate that there is no one thing that is likely to radically transform young lives for the better. Changes (for better or worse) in one area of a child’s life can affect their attainment, but may also place varying importance on other aspects that support their continued development.

### The importance of social worlds: an investigation of peer relationships

Research Report No. 29, by Leslie Morrison Gutman and John Brown

There has been an increased interest in the role of peer groups and their effects on children’s academic achievement and behaviour. Much of this interest has focused on bullying and victimisation, whereas relatively little consideration has been given to the wider patterns of friendship. Using longitudinal data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, we investigated the developing social worlds in late primary school. Our findings indicate that most (75 per cent) primary schoolchildren belong to positive friendship groups. These children feel supported by their friends and do not engage in bullying or experience victimisation. Overall, there were three positive groups: positive, many friends (48 per cent of the sample), positive but fallout (18 per cent), and positive, few friends (10 per cent).

One in four primary schoolchildren, however, belongs to groups characterised by poor social relationships which have low friendship support and a much higher general prevalence of victimisation and/or bullying compared to the other groups. These negative friendship groups were labelled victims (20 per cent of the sample) and bully/victims (5 per cent). Very few children (fewer than 1 per cent) were ‘pure bullies’. There is also a strong continuity between early development, later friendship patterns and continued well-being. Pupils in negative friendship groups were more likely to have worse indicators of development in their pre-school years – lower language, social and pro-social development as well as more hyperactivity than the other groups – but there was no significant difference among groups with more positive friendship patterns.

We also found that children in negative friendship groups were more likely to suffer from poor well-being later, exhibiting more negative behaviours indicative of later personality difficulties compared to the more positive groups. Symptoms were most severe for bully/victims, indicating that these children may be particularly at risk of severe mental health problems as they mature. These findings highlight the importance of continued implementation of programmes such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) and arrangements through the National Strategies for targeting schools that have particular bullying issues.

# WBL produces synthesis of key findings

On 20th October WBL launched a synthesis of evidence from the Centre's research programme stretching back over the previous ten years.

→ This new report from WBL reveals what researchers have discovered about how education affects individual well-being, family dynamics and community cohesion. It focuses particularly on the impact of learning on health, crime, parenting and citizenship. Many of the findings in the report are derived from WBL analyses of the cohort studies that are tracking the lives of people born in Britain in 1958 and 1970. Some findings are drawn from reports by other researchers, both in the UK and in other countries, who share an interest in this fascinating and profoundly important area of study.

Invitees from government departments, think-tanks, funders and academia were met with a welcome glass of wine and canapés after braving the wet weather to attend the launch at One Birdcage Walk, Westminster.

John Vorhaus, Director of WBL, gave the welcoming address, describing the origins and development of the Centre, and the challenges and opportunities

that lay ahead, including the contribution he hoped that the Centre would continue to make towards an improved understanding and modelling of the benefits of learning over the lifecourse.

He was followed by John Bynner, who was instrumental in the creation of the Centre in 1999, and who spoke about the early history of WBL and the projects he helped set up in the years following its inception. To the surprise of some present, knowing only of more recent work, the initial and exclusive priority of the Centre was adult learning and the impact of education at this stage of the lifecourse on wider social outcomes.

We then heard from Leon Feinstein, Director of the Centre for a flourishing five years. Under his leadership the Centre began to undertake research on the wider benefits across the lifecourse as a whole. As Leon explained, the Centre was particularly concerned to explore the multi-level effects of learning, and their interactions, across multiple contexts and through each of the primary phases of education and the lifecourse.



By general consensus the event was deemed a huge success, and a fitting occasion to mark the wealth of evidence the Centre has now amassed and summarised for the service of colleagues in policy, research and practice.

**The report, *The social and personal benefits of learning: a summary of key research findings*, can be ordered and downloaded from the WBL website: [www.learningbenefits.net](http://www.learningbenefits.net)**

## Time use and mental health among young people in the UK, 1970-2006

**Leon Feinstein, Stephen C. Peck, Jacquelynne S. Eccles, Nicole Zarrett, John Brown, Annik Sorhaindo and Karen Robson**

→ A study by UNICEF (*An overview of child well-being in rich countries: A comprehensive assessment of the lives and well-being of children and adolescents in the economically advanced nations* (2007)) ranked the UK in the bottom third of equivalent countries for young people's well being, raising concerns for adolescents in this country. Perhaps more worryingly, other recent work by Stephan Collishaw shows increases in mental health problems among adolescents in the UK. To explore the possible pathways of causation driving these outcomes the Nuffield Foundation commissioned four projects looking at the relationship between mental health in adolescence and school, substance and alcohol abuse, parenting and time use. The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning was commissioned to study trends in adolescents' time use (out of school) to see if any changes had an impact on mental health. After scoping for potentially useful datasets, the most valuable information for this study was found in the BBC Time Use surveys 1975 and 2000 and the British Household Panel Survey 1994 to 2005.

The researchers found substantial changes in young people's time use over the past 30 years but there was no evidence of any change which could be deleterious to the development of mental health. The largest changes are

best characterised by a growth in affluence and economic access to resources over this period, most strongly seen in large increases in time spent travelling to leisure activities (most likely shopping and other consumer activities) and for domestic reasons. Increases in access to and use of personal transport/motor cars, and participation in leisure activities away from the home, were also evident, indicating a greater facility for expenditure in these areas, as well as perhaps greater parental monitoring of children's activities. In the technological sphere, it was expected that the introduction of new technologies over the time period of the study would have changed how adolescents spent their time. Indeed, the researchers found that the use of nearly all traditional forms of media declined in line with mounting computer use, with one exception: time spent by 11-19 year olds reading books had increased since the early nineties.

Overall, young people have changed how they spend their time, most evidently in their use of and access to transport and resources away from the home along with the uptake of new media technologies. Whilst young people continue to spend their discretionary time in ways that may not be fruitful or productive, no evidence was found that over the past 30 years this had increased in a way likely to be deleterious. Neither do young people show any trends in their use of time likely to put their mental health at risk.

## WBL new arrivals

### Polina Obolenskaya Quantitative Research Officer



Polina joined WBL in August 2008 after studying towards her PhD in Sociology at City University, which she has yet to complete. Polina's thesis explores the relationship between partnership transitions and family-related attitudes, using two British cohorts for comparison.

Whilst studying for her PhD, Polina also worked as a research assistant for the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB). She undertook analysis of a survey of blind and partially-sighted people in the UK, exploring issues related to well-being, social support and accidents.

In her spare time Polina is unearthing her hidden talents by learning Afrikaans, growing vegetables (unsuccessfully so far!), playing guitar/piano and decorating her house.

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### Andrew Jenkins Senior Research Officer and NIACE Fellow

Andrew Jenkins joined WBL in September 2008. He has a PhD in Economic and Social History from the University of Exeter. Andrew has been employed at the Institute of Education since 2000, mostly as a researcher in the Centre for Economics of Education, sister centre to WBL. His research interests are in the economic and wider benefits of adult learning, mainly using quantitative methods and longitudinal datasets.

Andrew liaises closely with National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) researchers on several projects and aims to contribute a quantitative dimension to their research. He is currently working on two research projects which will provide evidence for the NIACE Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning. One project looks at the relationship between neighbourhood deprivation and pupil attainment at Key Stage 3 (11 to 14) in England. The second project is investigating the effects of lifelong learning on the psychological well-being of older adults using data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing.

Andrew also works as a part-time tutor on Open University courses in the Maths and Computing Faculty in the east of England.

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### Dylan Kneale Postdoctoral Fellow



Dylan joined WBL in October 2008 as a Postdoctoral Fellow after studying for a PhD in Demography at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education. Dylan's PhD examined the factors that predict the timing of parenthood using the British Birth Cohort Studies, and he was particularly interested in contextual predictors. He examined a range of factors that propelled young people into early parenthood including dislike of school and low expectations, and also examined the factors predicting postponement and childlessness.

Prior to his PhD, Dylan worked in research and evaluation for the Prince's Trust, researching factors that prevented young people from accessing education and employment and evaluating the strength of various interventions. At WBL, he is developing his interest in the timing of parenthood but is combining this with transitions to independent housing of young people.

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## Forthcoming projects

➔ This year, WBL is starting work on a project looking at the social benefits of vocational education and training (VET) for individuals in a European context. In doing so, we will focus on private benefits of learning that are not traditionally quantified in economic terms, such as mental health, life satisfaction and civic participation, but that are of great value for individuals, families, the labour market and society.

The first stage of the project will review existing conceptual frameworks and develop a model for the impact of VET on wider (non-economic) outcomes for individuals. In the second stage, as in earlier work from the Centre, we will model and measure the impact of VET on wider outcomes, in particular self-rated health, smoking, mental health problems, asset accumulation, and membership of organisations, investigating change over time and the relative importance of VET over the lifecourse.

The project will use the European Community Household Panel Survey (ECHP) as the primary data source. The ECHP is a cross-national longitudinal survey which ran from 1994 to 2001 in 12 member states (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Portugal, the United Kingdom) joined by Austria (1995), Finland (1996) and Sweden (1997).

## Recent departures from WBL

**As well as welcoming several new members of staff to the WBL team, we have also sadly said goodbye to some colleagues recently.**

➔ Cathie Hammond has left WBL after almost eight years of working as Research Officer for the Centre on health-related issues. She intends to spend time working on her PhD and will remain part of WBL as a Research Associate.

Natalie Heath has decided to devote her energies to teaching primary school children and Cambridge undergraduates, although we hope to tempt her back at some point in the future.

Ricardo Sabates, former NIACE Fellow, has left WBL after nearly six years to take up the post of Senior Lecturer in International Education and Development at the University of Sussex. This takes him back to his principal academic field of interest and the opportunity to expand on his work at WBL in the context of development.

### WBL mission

WBL investigates the benefits gained from learning across the life course and examines the impact of these benefits in the context of broader social policy. We undertake rigorous research as a basis for dialogue with a range of government departments, the research community and practitioners.

### WBL values

**Scope:** We look to deepen understanding of the complex ways in which learning impacts upon individual health and wellbeing, family dynamics and community cohesion. To do this we take an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on theory and methods in sociology, psychology, public health, economics and political sciences.

Our research examines the effects of formal educational participation and learning. We also look at experiences that occur in informal learning and other contexts such as out-of-school provision for young people, institutional care and interactions within families.

**Validity:** Our research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, which support and test each other.

**Collaboration:** WBL looks to develop national and international collaborations to enrich our research and advance theoretical knowledge.

**Integrity:** We recognise our responsibility to ensure that our research is rigorous and trustworthy.

**Objectivity:** WBL is an objective research centre funded by government departments and other agencies.

**Accountability:** We seek to ensure academic accountability through submitting research to peer-reviewed journals and presenting at academic conferences and seminars.

**Investment:** We support the professional development of WBL members. To achieve this we encourage and fund staff to attend training to enhance their skills and give careful consideration to career implications when making decisions about roles on research projects, publications, conferences and networking.

## DCSF-funded projects

### Adult Learning

➔ Parental education is thought to be one of the key factors that promote children's academic development. Empirical studies, using sophisticated analytical techniques and complex research designs, have concluded that parental education does have a causal impact on children's educational achievement. However, the literature here has typically focused on the achievement of educational qualifications or years of schooling, and has largely ignored the role of adult education. *The impact of mothers' adult learning on children's academic performance* (Sabates and Duckworth) explores the influence of mothers' education during adulthood on the subsequent attainment of their children in the early teenage years, looking in particular at:

1. The relationship between mothers' participation in adult education and children's improvement in Key Stage 3 (age 14) English and maths test scores.
2. Whether this relationship varies depending on the type of adult learning course taken, the time spent in adult learning by mothers or their previous educational background.

This report will be published in Spring 2009.

### Parenting in the Early Years

➔ Few would argue that parents play a paramount role in children's development. Yet, there is less research examining "why parents parent the way they do", particularly during the early years of childhood. The early years of parenting determine the path of subsequent parenting and influence children's development during a fundamental period leading to both short-term and long-term consequences. In this report, we focus on parenting from infancy to early childhood (0 to 5 years). In particular, we address the following questions:

- Why is parenting important in the early years given the current policy context?
- What is good parenting in the early years?
- What are the determinants of parenting in the early years?
- What are the implications for early parenting interventions?

This report will be published in early 2009.

## Projects funded from other sources

### Social housing

➔ The Housing Corporation, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and the Scottish Government are funding WBL and colleagues from LSE to extend the work of the Smith housing report (Smith Institute-funded *The Public Value Of Social Housing: A longitudinal analysis of the relationship between housing and life chances* (2008)). We are currently undertaking a cross-cohort comparison using the National Survey of Health and Development, the National Child Development Study, the British Cohort Study and Millennium Cohort Study to see how and why social housing impacts on cohort members at different stages of the life course, including examining relationships between tenure and housing quality, exploring young adult housing trajectories, and looking at regional differences. A final report is programmed for Spring 2009.