

WBL Update

Summer 2009 www.learningbenefits.net

Welcome from the Director, John Vorhaus

→ This issue of WBL Update comes at an exciting time – a time of change during which the team as a whole has responded with renewed and impressive commitment to the centre and its work. A notable development is the arrival of Professor John Micklewright at the Institute of Education: he will join the Department of Quantitative Social Science, where he will have a special responsibility for WBL. He will provide senior leadership and advice to the entire team, and his arrival is greatly to be welcomed.

It is always a challenging phase in the life of any research centre to follow an extended period in which it has safely relied upon a core grant from Government. Now that period is largely behind us, we will be taking the opportunity to build on the strong research base that we have developed through our work for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). For example, our Research Director, Dr Leslie Gutman, is seeking to extend her successful work on aspirations, which has included a substantial review for DCSF and several 'keynote' invitations. These recently included a high-profile event hosted by the Government Office for the North East, where WBL shared a platform with Estelle Morris, the former Education Secretary. Working with Professor Ingrid Schoon, of the Institute of Education, and ex-WBL colleague Dr Ricardo Sabates, Leslie has completed a substantial submission on aspirations to the Economic and Social Research Council and

we are now awaiting their response.

In the meantime we continue to feed into the Government policy agenda, with a significant number of DCSF projects recently completed or nearing completion. One has focused on the influences and levers available to policy for improving low attainment in the 14-19 age range. A second comprises a review of literature on an increasingly prominent concept: self regulation – that is, the capacity to regulate one's thoughts, beliefs and emotions. Parenting has featured amongst WBL priorities for some years now, and another recent report explores why parenting is important, the determinants of parenting and what makes for good parenting in the early years.

We have an ongoing project on a subject which enjoys an even higher profile than self-regulation. Children's wellbeing is increasingly preoccupying policymakers: it is a goal of the Government to nurture wellbeing in educational settings, and to select the most appropriate measures for assessing it. We review the literature on conceptions and measures of wellbeing, looking at how changes in wellbeing are related to age and development, the influences that account for these, and the reasons why some people are at risk of low levels of wellbeing.

Looking to the future, our emerging programme makes the most of the evidence base we have

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built up over the last few years, but also takes us into new areas. Parenting is one example: our expertise has led to a commission from Greenwich Council to carry out a parenting needs analysis, where the primary aim is to identify any discrepancies between existing provision and the areas of greatest need. Our researcher Polina Obolenskaya is leading on this over the next few months. Wellbeing is another case: we have recently embarked on a seven-year evaluation of the work of an extraordinary school – the Mulberry Bush School in Oxfordshire. The school works exclusively with children who have endured violent, traumatic or deeply damaged early lives and who have known only rejection from other schools and

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Discussion

Professors Bill Lucas and Guy Claxton have recently created the Centre for Real-World Learning (CRL) at the University of Winchester. Here they share some of their thinking and offer a sneak preview of their latest book for the Open University Press, *New Kinds of Smart: how the science of learnable intelligence is changing education*

For a number of years we have been interested in the ways in which research can help people become more effective learners. Our work is used in schools, hospitals, businesses, third sector organisations and, more recently, has begun to influence policy in, for example, education.

So the chance to work together at a new centre at a new university was a wonderful opportunity for us to focus on some of those interests. As the 'real-world' in our name suggests, the work of CRL focuses on the kinds of learning that people do outside formal education – in crafts, trades, professions, sports and family life, for example. Our aim is to understand better the kinds of intelligence that enable people to pursue real-life interests and respond to real-life challenges. We are also interested in how education can be a more effective preparation for these kinds of learning.

Core to this enterprise are a set of 'working hypotheses', for example; that: learning is learnable; many useful aspects of real-world intelligence are expandable; real-world learning relies on processes that are non-conscious and embodied; intelligence is a distributed and social phenomenon, as well as a cognitive one.

Our latest book, *New Kinds of Smart: how the science of learnable intelligence is changing education*, tries to weave together some of these strands. Aimed at practitioners in schools, the book lays out our agenda, summarises the research underpinning our approach, and offers practical examples of how it is already being usefully interpreted in schools across the world.

In brief, we argue for a view of intelligence as composite, made up of many threads intricately wound together. It is also expandable, as Stanford's Carol Dweck and Harvard's David Perkins (with whom we have established a strategic partnership) have shown. Intelligence and physical activity are much more intimately connected than we have previously thought; making and doing can be cognitively sophisticated activities, not just bodily ones. And the emerging science of embodied cognition is helping to draw out some of the educational implications of these ideas.

In social learning it is not just children who learn by watching and listening, and not just adults who coach, teach and share knowledge – whether it be in a football team, an orchestra or a family. Consequently, we see intelligence as having an inherently ethical dimension. Some of the work of the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, with which we are also collaborating, illustrates this value-laden aspect of intelligence. In our view, real-world intelligence involves intuition as well as conscious thought: our brains 'speak to us' in a variety of different voices (which we may know as inspiration, hunches, inklings and so on). Sometimes these promptings are accurate and right; sometimes they need to be cross-checked with our more conscious selves.

Intelligence also has a reflective or strategic aspect, which involves intermittent moments of standing back from the flow of experience and 'taking stock' or 'having second thoughts'. People are enabled to make choices about, for example, when to think slowly and cautiously, and when to respond fast; or when to make use of the people and tools around us and when to tap into our own inner resources. This trainable inner 'coach' helps people to question and reflect. Do I need to take a break? Am I using the best method? Who else could help? What did I do last time I was stuck like this? And so on.

Of course we are not alone in pursuing many or all of these lines of inquiry. But CRL is rarer in its ambition to try to pull all of the strands together and weave them into an understanding of real-world learning and real-world intelligence that is both richer and more pragmatically useful than much of what has gone before.

www.winchester.ac.uk/realworldlearning

Director's report, continued...

sometimes their parents. We are working closely with teachers and management to evaluate the outcomes of their work against the key aims for all children set out in Every Child Matters. It is a privilege to have an opportunity to work in such a setting. As it is to conduct research on another exceptional organisation, the Salmon Youth Centre in Bermondsey. Here we are undertaking a two-year evaluation, with a view to providing evidence of the impact of their work on the lives and wellbeing of all those who choose to walk through their doors. Again, we are working closely with staff and managers, and Emma Salter will be spending a good portion of her life in the near future becoming familiar with the patterns and challenges facing one of our largest and most prominent inner-city youth centres.

We are also pursuing research along more orthodox lines. We were successful in our bid to the Nuffield Foundation to explore the impact of literacy and numeracy levels on the trajectories and wellbeing of older people. Dr Andrew Jenkins will lead a study that will make extensive use of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, and will make a significant contribution to our understanding of how basic skills affect the prospects of people in older age. The many other bids that we have developed include a series of proposals to extend a body of work on the impact of housing and neighbourhoods on life chances, led by ex WBL co-director, Dr Ruth Lupton.

All in all we have a varied and busy time ahead.

● Discussion provides a forum for people outside WBL to voice their ideas and opinions. If you would like to contribute to the Autumn 2009 discussion piece, please contact Rodie Akerman at r.akerman@ioe.ac.uk

Recently published

● Since the last issue of WBL Update, the Centre has published two research reports (see below and overleaf). All WBL research reports are available to download from: www.learningbenefits.net/publications/ResearchReports.htm

Nurturing Parenting Capability: The Early Years

Research Report No. 30, by Leslie Morrison Gutman, John Brown and Rodie Akerman

➔ Parenting is a high-profile issue in the UK, as illustrated by the recent Good Childhood Inquiry conducted by the Children's Society. Still, we have relatively little information concerning "why parents parent the way they do". Statistics show that socio-economic background is significant, but what else matters for parenting? Is who you are or what you do with your child more important? Do a child's characteristics influence the way a mother interacts with them? How do sources of support, such as partners and friends, relate to parenting? Clearly, a better understanding of such issues would help to establish how we can best support parents and whom we should target.

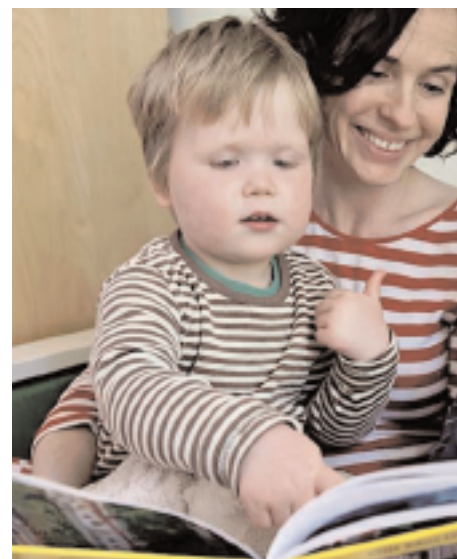
To address these questions, we investigated how mothers' and children's characteristics as well as sources of support relate to the quality of parenting. Our research involved a detailed analysis of previously unreported data that were originally collected as part of the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) in the mid-1990s. We examined the recorded behaviour of 1,136 ALSPAC mothers who had been observed when reading a storybook to their child. This activity took place when the child was one year old and again at age five. We looked at two key aspects of parenting behaviour: the warmth of the interaction and mothers' use of instructive, educational communication.

Our findings suggest that both "who you are" and "what you do with your child" are important in terms of parenting. Personal characteristics such as mental health and practices such as breastfeeding are significant. Socio-demographics perhaps have less influence than we might expect: education is important but not family income or marital status. Children's characteristics do not appear to influence parenting at this early stage. Social networks, however, boost parenting capabilities.

Mothers' mental health is an important factor in their parenting. Mothers with post-natal depression tend to engage in less educational communication than other mothers. Mothers with greater sensitivity toward others also demonstrate better parenting. Our findings suggest these differences may be particularly prominent for single mothers. While quality of parenting is similar among married mothers regardless of their level of sensitivity, single mothers with greater sensitivity tend to engage in more educational communication with their babies than single mothers with low sensitivity. Sensitivity does not necessarily imply better mental health, however. Interpersonal sensitivity at high levels indicates neuroticism and is related to other mental health problems such as depression. This highlights the complex nature of parenting and reminds us that not all indicators of mental health operate in the same way for different populations of mothers.

Breastfeeding is also associated with more positive parenting practices. Our analysis suggests that mothers who breastfeed for six or more months tend to engage in more educational communication with their babies than mothers who bottle-feed. The greatest differences in behaviour are between two groups of single and low-income mothers – those who breastfeed for between 6 and 12 months, and those who bottle-feed. Marital status had no effect on the quality of a mother's interaction with her child, provided she had breastfed for 6 to 12 months. In fact, single mothers who had breastfed for this period made slightly more effort than other mothers to explain the storybook to their child.

Poorer women who breastfed interacted with their one-year-old babies during the book-reading exercise almost as well as more advantaged mothers did. However, low-income mothers who bottle-fed their babies tend to communicate with them much less well than other mothers. In the repeat experiment four years later, mothers who had been on a low income when their child was one, but had breastfed for more than six months, had a higher quality of interaction with their five-year-old than other mothers. They also made more



“These findings provide support for government policies that encourage breastfeeding, particularly for disadvantaged mothers.”

effort to engage their child in the book-reading exercise compared with mothers who had not breastfed. By contrast, breastfeeding appears to have had no lasting effect on the parenting behaviours of married and higher-income mothers. These findings underscore the protective influence of breastfeeding for lone parent and low-income families and provide support for government policies that encourage breastfeeding, particularly for more disadvantaged mothers.

We also find that more highly educated mothers tend to have higher quality interactions and better educational communication with their infants than less educated mothers, even when taking into account family income and marital status. These findings highlight the apparent **continued...**

Influences and leverages on low levels of attainment: a review of literature and policy initiatives

Research Report No. 31, by Kathryn Duckworth, Rodie Akerman, Leslie Morrison Gutman and John Vorhaus

The ideas of excellence and equity for all children and young people underpin Government policy, but there remain a significant number of low-attaining pupils. We need to understand both the influences on low attainers, and how policy can intervene to help: hence this review.

We first consider who the low attainers are, and provide an analysis of the individual, family and school-level factors associated with low attainment. These factors are many and complex, and it is not always possible to determine whether one factor is causing or being caused by another. However, there is convincing evidence that individual characteristics and family background have a significant effect on achievement, from the earliest years. Compared with others, boys, minority ethnic groups, children from low socio-economic backgrounds and children with poor home learning environments

do substantially worse on average. While the most significant indicator of achievement is prior attainment, academic trajectories are by no means fixed. A good school or pre-school can have a lasting beneficial influence, and primary school has more impact on eventual outcomes than secondary school.

The report goes on to review some of the policy initiatives attempting to raise low levels of attainment. Successful approaches include: programmes to raise aspirations; incentives to stay in education beyond 16; supporting the development of a good home learning environment; and targeted support in school. Assigning more resources to schools does not seem on its own to have a substantial effect on attainment, and the evidence for setting and streaming having a positive effect is far from robust. Targeted initiatives may be more successful than universal approaches, particularly if they are flexible to local circumstances. Finally, providing support for parents in the early years may be particularly beneficial for children in both the short term and at later periods in their lives.

Nurturing Parenting Capability: The Early Years (continued...)

importance of maternal education relative to other socio-economic factors. It is, however, possible that mothers' intelligence, personality and family characteristics may account for such differences. So, it is difficult to ascertain whether it is education itself or the qualities leading one to obtain higher levels of education that influence parenting.

Our study also suggests that mothers who have more extensive social networks have higher quality interactions with their infants than those with less developed networks. Having an extensive social network and increasing the frequency of contact with friends and family is important, particularly for parents of young children. At a community level, the networking and social interactions that go on between parents in children's centres, early-years settings, neighbourhood groups and many other local venues, such as libraries, and health and leisure centres, are of great value.

We therefore recommend that maternal mental health, breastfeeding and social networks form the focus of sensitive intervention efforts to boost parenting capabilities. This may have substantial benefits for mothers in more disadvantaged communities, both in the short and long term. Given the interconnections among maternal mental health, breastfeeding, and social networks, we suggest that interventions focus on multiple dimensions of mothers' lives. For example, efforts to support maternal wellbeing may be co-ordinated to extend social networks and encourage breastfeeding. The best time to target mothers is most likely during pregnancy, as there is greater access due to antenatal appointments. Mothers' mental health at this early stage should also be targeted as it affects other factors, such as their feelings concerning breastfeeding. Considering the importance of parenting for children's development, investing in parents in the early years can have dividends that extend to the school years and beyond.

Policy Update

Rodie Akerman, Policy Research Officer

The past few months have seen much Government policy documentation that is relevant to the WBL research agenda. At the end of 2008 came the publication of *The Children's Plan One Year On*, as well as the vision statement, *21st Century Schools: A World-Class Education for Every Child* – due to be followed by a White Paper on schools as this newsletter went to press. Meanwhile, the wide-ranging Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill is making its way through Parliament. Several new strategies have also been set out, including *Healthy lives, brighter futures – The strategy for children and young people's health*, and *Next Steps for Early Learning and Childcare*. Neither has adult learning been forgotten, with a White Paper on informal adult learning, and a House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee report, *Re-skilling for recovery: After Leitch*.

Cutting across all of these areas is the White Paper on social mobility, *New Opportunities: Fair chances for the future*. Against the background of tough economic times, this paper sets out how the Government plans to spark greater social mobility by helping more people into better jobs. Its compass is broad, covering the early years, schools, young people, working life, families and communities. Within these the top priorities are: school standards; supporting access to higher education for those whose families have no experience of it; and investment in the skills of the workforce. There is also an emphasis on improving children's health and wellbeing, and on support for parents. These connect closely with much recent and current WBL work: we have focused on nurturing parenting capability and on raising low attainment (see articles on this and the previous page), and projects underway are considering children's wellbeing, and the wider benefits of vocational training. The findings will add to the research base for the policy community as it takes forward its work to enhance social mobility.

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.

Current Research

Adult learning in the workplace: the impact of Skills for Life

Alison Wolf, Karen Evans, Liam Aspin, Andrew Jenkins and Ed Waite

➔ This project explored the impact on learners and their organisations of government-funded workplace programmes designed to increase literacy skills. It was a longitudinal study, with 567 learners and 53 workplaces involved. We tested the reading and writing skills of participants at the start of their courses and then a year and two years later. We gathered in-depth information on all three occasions about jobs, education, attitudes to work, and aspirations. We also measured how people felt about themselves as learners.

Tests of reading performance a year and two years after the course showed a very small average gain in performance on each occasion. However, for native English speakers the improvement did not reach conventional statistical significance levels; the larger improvements were among ESOL – English as a Second Language – learners. It is quite likely that this simply reflects longer time in an English-speaking environment.

The courses typically offered 30 hours of tuition. After this, no further free instruction was available to participants. However, previous research, among college-based adults, suggests that substantial progress requires much longer than this. Note that a single term for school pupils offers well over 200 hours of direct instruction. Employed adults can also improve their literacy skills if they have the opportunity to use them more at work. Our study confirmed that such opportunities can result in substantial progress, but are quite rare in spite of widespread belief that the ‘knowledge economy’ is transforming the workplace.

More positively, we found that the experience of formal learning can have a lasting effect on participants’ attitudes and activities. Most of the sample had done very little previous, formal post-school learning. Following their courses, there was a modest but statistically significant increase in the numbers undertaking additional formal learning (compared with what would have been expected from national data). Three quarters reported feeling differently about education, and over half reported reading more.

The project was funded as part of the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme. Further details of the project can be found at: trp.org/pub/documents/wolfRB59final.pdf

Farewells

We have sadly had to say goodbye to some colleagues in recent months:

Ruth Lupton took up a Research Fellowship in the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) at the London School of Economics in September 2008, although she continued to work part-time at WBL until early 2009 to complete a project on social housing. She is now full-time at CASE; however, we hope to be able to join forces with her on future research projects.

Kathryn Duckworth left WBL in early 2009, having won a post-doctoral fellowship within the Department of Quantitative Social Sciences at the Institute to develop her work on cross-cohort comparisons and exploring the mechanisms through which social adversity affects children’s educational success. Her input on academic and other matters is sorely missed, but she at least has not gone far. We are also pleased to announce that she has recently been successful in passing her PhD viva. Congratulations to Dr Duckworth!

Ean Ravenscroft, the administrator of WBL, has left the unit to pursue other interests. He will be missed by the team for his efficiency and general contribution to life in WBL and we hope an opportunity will arise shortly which will enable us to work with him again.