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Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning,
Institute of Education, University of London

Early assessments help to identify children at risk of blighted adulthoods

The vast majority of children who will go on to experience serious deprivation in their adult years can now be identified by the age of 10, a new report suggests.

Researchers at the Institute of Education, University of London, believe that between 70 per cent and 90 per cent of youngsters heading for blighted adulthoods can be spotted while still in primary school from what is known about their personal and family circumstances.

They have also found that a simple copying test that gauges a child's ability to replicate shapes and simple patterns at the age of 5 is an extremely accurate predictor of later success in school and early adulthood.

The predictive power of the new generation of educational, social and psychological assessments that can be carried out in primary and secondary schools is described in a report published today. It reviews some of the key findings that the Institute's Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning has produced over the past nine years.

"In our view it would be socially and economically inefficient – and morally unacceptable – to ignore this very high level of capacity to identify early on those at risk of high-cost, high-harm outcomes," the report's authors say.

They add that the Centre's research into young children's ability to copy patterns and shapes such as diamonds, crosses and circles has confirmed that too many bright children from disadvantaged backgrounds are failing to fulfil their potential.

"Our research has shown that this particular ability is an extremely accurate indicator of reading and maths ability at age 10 and life success at age 30, as measured by the highest qualification gained by that age," the researchers say. "However, this link with success holds true for all groups except those children who achieved a high copying score but come from families with low socio-economic status. This is a worrying finding that points to a key reason for the lack of social mobility."

The Centre's research has also shown that much can be done to avoid this waste of talent. One recent study showed, for example, that children from disadvantaged families who are given a good grounding in numeracy in infant school are more likely to succeed in not only maths but English at the age of 11.

“It is possible that doing well in maths at age 7 acts to heighten children’s self-confidence and aspirations,” says the report. “It may also encourage teachers to offer them more support.”

However, the report acknowledges that academic success alone does not determine how well a person will fare in adulthood. Another of the Centre’s recent research projects demonstrated that children who gained no qualifications but flourished in school socially were enjoying better health in their early thirties than those who had been unsuccessful in both aspects of school life. Women who had not flourished either academically or socially were almost five times as likely to be smokers at the age of 33 as those who were non-academic but more socially adjusted.

The report considers what has been discovered about how education affects individuals, families and communities. It also discusses the impact of learning on health, crime, parenting and citizenship. Most of the report’s findings are derived from the Centre’s analyses of two large-scale longitudinal studies based at the Institute of the Education that are tracking the lives of people born in 1958 and 1970.

The social and personal benefits of learning: a summary of key research findings will be published on Monday, October 20. The report will be launched at a drinks reception to be held at One Birdcage Walk, London SW1, from 5.30-6.30pm on Monday evening. Journalists wishing to attend the reception or receive an electronic version of the report prior to publication should contact:

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Editors’ footnote:

The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning was set up in 1999 by the then Department for Education and Employment and receives funding from a number of public and private bodies, including the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Its recent research reports can be downloaded from its website

www.learningbenefits.net

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