PRESS RELEASE
Monday 23 September 2013

CLASS RANKING, CONFIDENCE AND LATER EXAM RESULTS:
New evidence from schools in England

Pupils who rank higher in primary school perform better in secondary school, but not only because they are smarter but because their previous success inspires confidence. That is the central finding of a new study by Richard Murphy and Felix Weinhardt of the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) at the London School of Economics.

Their research, which is published today, also finds that boys are four times more affected by being top of class compared to girls. Similarly, pupils who receive free school meals gain more from being at the top, though they seem not to suffer from being at the bottom.

Dr Felix Weinhardt says:

‘Our findings go against the common assumption that having better peers is always the best for children.

‘Our study suggests that there are situations where your child will be better off from not going to the school with high-performing peers, especially for boys’.

The findings are based on an analysis of performance data on over two million pupils in England and a survey on confidence of 15,000 pupils. In the survey, pupils are asked to rate themselves on how good they are in each subject.

Imagine two pupils of the same high ability: one is top of class but the other is in the middle as the school they attend attracts many high ability students. The research finds that the pupil who was top of class performs better in secondary school and is more confident. The effect of rank is as important as teaching quality.

The effects on confidence on later test scores are subject-specific. This means that a high rank in mathematics in primary school, for example, improves later outcomes in mathematics. The study documents rank effects separately for English, mathematics and science.

Richard Murphy comments:

‘While we cannot make every pupil top of class, our research highlights the importance of confidence in order to succeed’.

While this research is focused on educational outcomes, the authors stress that principle of rank improving confidence and outcomes could be applied to many other settings.

Richard Murphy adds:

‘It is human nature for us to compare ourselves against others. A kid being the best in their street at football would become more confident and spend more time playing and so further improve.

‘Adults could also be affected: being surrounded by friends who are always dating may damage your confidence with the opposite sex.’

ENDS

Notes:

‘The Importance of Rank Position’ by Richard Murphy and Dr Felix Weinhardt is published by the Centre for Economic Performance. The Discussion Paper (No.1241) is available to download.

Richard Murphy is currently a Research Officer at the London School of Economics, based in the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP), London School of Economics and Political Science. Felix Weinhardt is currently ESRC postdoctoral fellow in Economics at the London School of Economics and Political Science, based in the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP).