Happy Children Become Satisfied Adults, Successful Children Less So

Research published today in the Economic Journal challenges the basic assumption of educational policy – that academic achievement matters more than anything else.

Researchers at the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) at the London School of Economics have been investigating which dimensions of children’s development to age 16 best predict whether the resulting adults will be satisfied with their lives. They find that the most important thing is the emotional health of the child; next the child’s behaviour; and least important the academic achievements of the child.

This finding is highly relevant as the UK’s new secretary of state for education Nicky Morgan reverses her predecessor’s refusal to address the wellbeing of children.

The aim of the new study was to provide policy-makers with a completely new perspective on which factors contribute most to a satisfying life. So the research team analysed data on around 9,000 members of the 1970 birth cohort who have been followed from birth up to the age of 34.

As adults they were asked how satisfied they are with their lives. The study first examined which factors in childhood best predicted this outcome. But it then traced how these factors had their impact.

Once someone is an adult, their enjoyment of life depends on many things – income, employment, educational achievement, criminal conduct or otherwise, family life and mental and physical health. Many people assume that income is the most important of these, but in fact it is far less important than emotional health. Income only explains about 1% of the variation in life satisfaction among people in the UK – one sixth of the fraction explained by emotional health.

So while intellectual development is the strongest predictor of income, it is not the strongest predictor of life satisfaction. Moreover, emotional health helps children to learn and thus makes its own contribution to economic success.

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The authors have also been prominent in persuading OECD countries to measure the wellbeing of their populations. Following on that success, the OECD has formed a consortium of researchers
in member countries aiming at explaining wellbeing. This is the first report produced in that programme. It is funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council and the National Institute on Aging of the United States.

CEP’s Wellbeing programme is also sponsoring a major experiment to teach life skills to 11-14 year olds. ‘Healthy Minds’ is a randomised trial involving 34 schools, more details at http://howtothrive.org/healthy-minds/

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