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A new UK study says teachers can overcome pupils' background

Schools really do matter

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The morning one of the great post-war educational myths is demolished for ever. For nearly 20 years, the belief that children's home backgrounds are of far greater importance than the schools they attend has dominated educational thinking. Good results have been attributed to favoured school intakes, poor results to social disadvantages.

Now a new study shows that schools do matter. It demonstrates that junior schools can affect children's progress to such an extent that the best and the worst can reverse the long-established advantage of middle-class over working-class children. For example, in maths, the school, far from being powerless to reverse social handicap, is 10 times more important than the home.

A good school will enjoy small classes, a stable staff and a head who has been at the school for between three and seven years; it will allow children freedom within a clear structure; it will praise its pupils more than it criticises them, it will involve parents in the classroom and on visits; and it will organise lessons round particular areas of the curriculum.

And if that sounds like common sense, it is worth remembering how much of what has bees said and done about education over the past 20 years has asserted precisely the opposite: governments and local authorities have neglected school buildings; researchers have claimed that large classes produce better results; inspectors have pressed for larger schools; theorists have advocated total freedom for pupils.

The study is from a team led by Peter Mortimore, now professor of educational research at Lancaster University and formerly head of research for the Inner London Education Authority. His team traced the fortunes of 2,000 children in 50 London schools over the four years (seven to 11) of junior schooling.

It must be emphasized that the study confirms the decisive influence of home background on attainment. At seven, children whose parents worked in non-manual jobs were nearly 10 months ahead in reading than pupils from unskilled manual homes. By the end of the third year, the gap had widened.

At seven, the first group wrote stories with an average length of 110 words; those with fathers in unskilled other to 80. The second child's attainment remains higher, but her progress has clearly been slower. It is this kind of difference that Professor Mortimore examined.

And he found that schools have an overwhelming influence on children's progress between entry to junior school and the end of their third year. In reading the school was four times more important than home background; in maths and writing, 10 times more important. On a 100-point reading test, the average child at the most effective school increased his or her score by 25 points more than the average child at the least effective school.

On other measures—oral proficiency, behaviour, the child's self-concept, attitudes to school and to school work—the school had a substantial influence.

Professor Mortimore found that schools which did better on one measure of academic progress tended to do better on the others. One school raised average reading performance by 24 per cent. Another school depressed scores to almost exactly the same extent.

Schools that did well academically did not necessarily do well in non-academic areas such as behaviour and attitudes. But good non-academic achievements were not related to bad academic performance either. Success in one sphere did not preclude success in the other.

Finally, schools that got good results usually did so for all their children, not just for a particular class, sex or ethnic group. There was no evidence that, even in the Labour-controlled ILEA, individual schools were closing the gap between disadvantaged and privileged pupils.

But the very good and very bad schools, between them, could reverse the normal social order. The researchers analysed the social c classes in 21 schools. In the three most effective, working-class children averaged higher reading scores than middle-class children in the four least effective.

So what made some schools better than others? Voluntary-aided schools did particularly well, though it is not wholly clear why. Schools that kept children from five to 11 did better than junior schools that were separate from infant schools. Small schools—with 160 or fewer children of junior age—were particularly effective in academic progress. Schools did worse where heads had been in the job for less than three years or more than seven. Predictably, frequent changes of teacher during the school year retarded progress. Though the age and structure of buildings made little difference those that were well decorated and maintained had a positive effect, mainly in non-academic areas.

Perhaps most important, schools where classes had an average of 24 or fewer pupils made better progress than schools with average class sizes of 27 or more. This flatly contradicts other studies which have shown that smaller classes make little difference or even depress attainment. The authors suggest that such studies have focused too narrowly on language outcomes (small classes had a particularly marked effect on maths progress) and have foiled to allow for the tendency of schools to put lower-achieving pupils in small classes.

Such factors outside the school's direct control, provide a framework for success. But they did not, by themselves, ensure it. "It is the factors within the control of the head and teachers that are crucial," the authors say. They identified 12 ways in which a junior school can make itself more effective (see Book)

For example, if the school had a narrow concentration on basic skills, progress was poor. In the best schools, "teachers obviously enjoyed teaching their slasses valued the fun factor and communicated their enthusiasm to the chid: dren". Equally, teachers did badly if they gave children too much freedom of choice or tried to teach different areas of the curriculum at the same time.

Twelve factors which make a good primary school

THE study identifies 12 key factors that make a good junior school:

- **A head who leads his staff without exerting total control.**
- **An established deputy head, who is rarely absent and to whom the head delegates important duties.**
- **Teachers are given a say in such matters as spending and curriculum planning.**
- **Consistency between teachers in their approach to learning.**
- **Encouraging children to manage their own work, but not giving them complete freedom to choose what they do.**
- **Intellectually stimulating talk between children and teachers, involving challenging questions; telling the children what to do without explaining its purpose is less effective.**
- **Creating work-centred classrooms, where the noise level is low and teachers are able to discuss the content of learning with children, rather than spending time on routine matters.**
- **Lessons that concentrate on one subject (or, at most, two subjects) rather than mixing three or more curriculum areas. Pupil's work should be geared to the ability of the individual child.**
- **Maximum communication between the teacher and the whole class, but not traditional chalk-and-talk.**
- **Keeping written records of pupils' work and progress.**
- **Parental involvement in classrooms, school visits and in helping children at home. Formal parent-teacher associations, however, were ineffective.**
- **Emphasis on praising and rewarding, rather than punishing and criticising children.**

Birth dates count

THE study shows that school success is influenced by date of birth. At seven, a child born in the autumn term averaged 51.4 on a reading test, while a summer-born child averaged 40.8. There were similar disparities in maths and writing tests. The differences were unchanged by the end of junior school.

Summer children were nearly twice as likely to have behaviour difficulties and more likely to have negative attitudes to school. Some studies suggest that such problems — created by being the youngest in their classes — persist throughout secondary school and even beyond.