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EDITORIAL

What can policy learn from the research on the wider benefits of learning?

Lee Cronbach, Professor of Educational Psychology at Stanford University and convener of the Stanford Evaluation Consortium, wrote in 1975 that 'the special task of the social scientist is to pin down the contemporary facts' and further that 'a reasonable aspiration is to develop explanatory concepts, that will help people use their heads' (Cronbach, 1975, p. 126). Cronbach was stating a principle in relation to the research–policy relationship that has just as much force today. Social science does not in itself produce policy but it can provide an empirical and theoretical sounding board against which to test policy ideas and it can contribute to those ideas through offering new ways of looking at things. Cronbach's emphasis on 'the contemporary facts' also makes the point that *context* in time and across space is critically important in drawing research findings into the policy process (also see Cronbach, 1980).

Life course theory, which takes these kinds of ideas forward (Elder, 1998; Giele & Elder, 1998), focuses on the ways in which the changing socio-political context, the sets of shared relationships, the stage of development an individual has reached and the timing of policy interventions, all come together in determining policy impact. Thus the most effective relationship between research and policy is rather in the nature of a continually updated dialogue. Policy-makers governed by the political process need to take account of evidence predicting the outcomes of different policy options, the ways in which implementation takes place and evolves and the actual measured outcomes once implementation is completed. Theoretical work accompanies the collection of evidence but does not dictate in any simple linear sense what policy should do to achieve given ends. Rather it may inform the way in which the problems with which policy-makers engage can be thought about. It is in this way that concepts, ranging from risk and resilience to capitals and capabilities, serve policy most effectively.

Such themes served as a point of reference for the work presented at a conference organized by the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL) at the London Institute of Education.[1] The conference took place in September 2004 to celebrate the first five years of the Centre's programme and to introduce the next three-year phase. The conference comprised a series of plenary sessions covering three

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of the main themes of the Centre's work, family, health and community, and one on mixed methodologies. Each plenary was followed by a series of parallel workshops at which WBL members presented research findings from the programme, in company with outside researchers presenting their own findings on similar themes. Each day was rounded off with presentations from speakers from the policy perspective, including: John Elliott, Chief Economist, DfES and Richard Bartholomew, Director of Research in the Family and Children Directorate, DfES; Tom Schuller, Head of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Andrew Morris, Programme Director of the Educational Research Forum.

This special edition of the *London Review of Education* includes three of the plenary papers that were presented together with three papers from the WBL team building on the presentations made at the conference. In this overview paper, we examine, in a bit more detail, the critical issues in relation to engaging research with policy, discussing the main ideas that have come from the first stage of the WBL programme and how these are being translated into the themes of the new programme.

What are the outcomes of learning?

Much educational policy in the past was directed at improving the curriculum and its immediate outcomes in terms of learning gains and qualifications. The longer term consequences of the education process through schooling and what follows in the form of 'lifelong learning' has moved only relatively recently to centre stage. Initially the dominant concern was with economic returns. That is to say the earnings gained that an individual might expect to achieve through a particular educational experience or qualification. The scope extended with the growing interest in the role of education in employability, fundamentally an economic issue, but now also driven by the broader set of social policy concerns with marginalization in the labour market and social exclusion. Thus, in the high skills economy that was increasingly taking over from the 1970s onwards, skills that were of relatively little importance to employability, including literacy and numeracy, now became prerequisites for getting a job (Banks *et al.*, 1992).

The economic returns linking earnings to learning are a clear private benefit to the extent that the individual's wage may be enhanced by the education they gain. But they also have a 'public good' status in the sense that education is believed to enhance productivity and employability of the individual employee and consequently competitiveness for firms and the economy as a whole. Thus the benefits to the individual also bring economic benefits to society though increased production, economic growth and tax revenues. These benefits are social, going beyond the private benefit captured by the wages paid by firms (Becker, 1975; see Wolf, 2002, for a contrary view). There are also, perhaps, even more important public and private aspects to the non-economic benefits of learning beyond the productivity effects. To the extent that education enhances an individual's quality of life this may reflect a wider private benefit but there may also be important social benefits

through improved health, for example, that may bring reduced health service costs as well as benefits for families and other social networks. Learning as a shared activity, cutting across class and ethnic boundaries, is also likely to enhance tolerance and mutual understanding and to stimulate social and political participation. Hence another public benefit of learning lies in its contribution to social capital and the strengthening of social cohesion.

Interest in the social consequences of education and interest in the wider non-economic benefits of education, such as health, family life, parenting and citizenship is relatively recent, without very much evidence of research on it until about 10 years ago. The Labour government that entered office in 1997 made a point of redressing the imbalance by promoting, from the very beginning, the value of education in social cohesion and quality of life terms linking learning gains to social capital accumulation and active citizenship. The logical extension of this interest is, as Tom Schuller, one of the policy speakers at the conference, pointed out, commitment to a lifelong learning educational agenda. The capacity to take advantage of opportunities, establish and achieve new goals, and meet such challenges in life as unemployment, illness, family breakdown and bereavement, is critically dependent on the renewal of skills and the strengthening of capability in all spheres. The wider benefits therefore have an integral role in the dynamics of life course processes and lifelong learning is the vehicle for delivering them. But Tom Schuller also pointed out that the vagaries of the political process tend to shift the focus of education policy repeatedly back to schools and teachers, or higher education. Lifelong learning is always there, but rarely gains the *central place* in the educational agenda that full acknowledgement of its importance demands.

Family transfers

Learning begins at home in the sense that what happens in the earliest years of life tends to influence what happens later when the formal system takes over. The family does not simply disappear into the background when education proper begins, as Jacque Eccles' paper demonstrates through statistical modeling of children's educational development using longitudinal data. Parents' education, mediated by their attitudes to their children's education, plays a major part in the achievements gained, with different outcomes for boys and girls. They also report (quoting Magnuson, forthcoming) that engagement by parents of young children in courses predicts educational gains in their children. However, the dynamics of the relationships involved are complex, comprising both 'proximal' (principally relational) and 'distal' (principally social structural) components. To understand them, we need not only statistical analysis of the processes involved using longitudinal data, but biographical and ethnographic investigations running alongside the quantitative work to tease out the mechanisms involved.

When it comes to acting on the findings thought provoking questions are raised that reappear repeatedly through this volume. We first need to decide what it is about parents' attitudes and behaviour that has this effect, how it operates and why.

Thus language competence is strongly linked to education which might lie behind the apparent connection between parents' education and that of their children. Therefore would policy be better off targeting parents' language competence specifically rather than education in general? Other questions arise about dosage and frequency. How much parental education is needed to have a measurable effect on children; when is the best time to provide it; what form should it take to work best with parents in different social, economic and ethnic contexts?

The gender stereotyping mediated by parents, as highlighted by Eccles, that drives girls away from science and working class boys away from educational performance generally raises another set of thorny policy issues. Should parents' attitudes to their children's educational careers be confronted directly? Or should parents' influence be tackled more indirectly via the whole set of cultural values they espouse? Only through testing alternatives through different intervention strategies can answers ultimately be found to the research questions with which the research began. Thus research and policy are both cyclical and interactive moving ever closer, we hope, to optimum solutions to mutually agreed questions but against a background of continual socioeconomic and cultural change.

Learned effectiveness

A persistent finding in all societies is that social and educational variation correlates with variations in health and other quality of life measures. The higher up one is on the social and educational scale the more likely is this to be accompanied by relatively good health and quality of life. Such relationships prevail not only at the individual level but at the level of society. Those countries that show the least variability in educational achievement are also likely to be the ones with the lowest levels of health inequality (Green *et al*., 2003).

In their conference presentation John Mirowsky and Catherine Ross promoted the valuable education-based concepts of 'learned effectiveness' and 'resource substitution' as mechanisms to explain health inequalities. Drawing on evidence from their own longitudinal researches (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003) they developed the argument that education empowers people in the sense of giving them a sense of control over their lives—'learned effectiveness'—which carries through into a sense of positive well-being and good health. At times of emotional and economic stress, education empowers individuals to find protective solutions moving resources from one life domain to another, 'resource substitution'.

Such exercise of personal agency in surmounting obstacles and achieving fulfilment in the life course is also well expressed in the concept of 'capability' promoted by the development economist Amartya Sen (Sen, 1992). Capabilities reflect the potential or *freedom* to achieve desired goals, including well-being, and hence to function effectively. The WBL Centre has made much of this construct, linking it to the broader set of economic concerns with human capital and such extensions as social capital, cultural capital and, more recently, identity capital (Côté & Levine, 2002). In these terms capabilities are the building blocks of

different forms of capital, both comprising the stock and the returns to investment in new learning (Schuller *et al*., 2004a). People who are effectively obstructed from gaining capability—in more narrow policy terms the ever evolving skills gap—find their lives increasingly restricted and their goals increasingly thwarted. This supplies the basis of the 'social exclusion' to which policy in the modern era pays so much attention.

Choice and identity

The modern life course is often seen as being more complex, risk laden and unpredictable than it was in the past (Beck, 1986). As technological change and globalization accelerates, individuals are driven to recreate continually their identities in terms of skills, beliefs and relationships to keep afloat (Giddens, 1991). Children confront increasing difficulties in achieving the transition to adulthood because of the ever-increasing range of choices that they are compelled to make—a challenge that also confronts their parents.

As Jim Côté, another of our plenary speakers, argued, many of these choices are the inevitable consequence of the changing nature of employment in a technological age. Others are bound up with consumption—the ever-expanding commercially driven range of goods and services to which individuals have access from an ever-reducing age. This abundance of choice replaces what was, at one time, a limited range of options in a market place. This puts pressure not only on children, but indirectly on their families through the continuing demand that is generated, both for what is fashionable and for variety in what is experienced. Paradoxically, therefore, the more choice we have the more its liberating qualities can transform into a form of tyranny (Schwartz, 2004).

The policy message ties up with learned effectiveness in the sense that capability is needed to support personal identity through enabling individuals to make choices effectively informed by the likely consequences of each of a range of options. Côté links this idea to the critical question of what modern citizenship should encompass, addressing another major dimension of the work of the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning.

Life course theory

All these components of the benefits of learning come together most usefully within the holistic picture supplied by life course theory. This starts from the point with which we began this paper, namely the changing context in which individual lives develop from birth through maturity to old age and how this context impacts on the trajectories involved. There are complex interactions between: the context of relationships; the context of social structures, as expressed through class, gender, ethnicity and location; the role of individual agency in choosing between the options on offer; and the cultural base of institutions through which continuities from one generation to the next are maintained.

Such a conception has been a major theme of the WBL Centre's research and has been helped enormously by the large scale longitudinal data sets (the British Cohort Studies) to which the team has ready access in the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education. We have been able to expose the long-term consequences of learning experiences over periods of 30 years or more. This has given powerful insights into the ways in which learning, within a given social context involving family and neighbourhood, can set processes in motion that lead to a range of positive (or sometimes negative) outcomes (see Feinstein *et al.*, 2003; Bynner *et al.*, 2003; Schuller *et al.*, 2004b).

The life course perspective is also valuable in policy terms because it directs attention to the critical questions of age and life course stage at which interventions are likely to be most effective in given contexts. The term the 'marginal pound' used by one of our policy speakers, John Elliott, has recently been adopted in some policy circles as shorthand for this problem (Delorenzi *et al.*, 2005). Where would the marginal pound produce the best returns—in early childhood, in adolescence, in middle age, or in later life? What are the dynamics of the processes through which its effects are realized? What are the best means of ensuring that policy goals are achieved?

The WBL Centre has made a significant contribution to answering these questions with its formulation of the idea of '*sustaining*' and '*transforming*' benefits (Schuller *et al.*, 2004b). Learning can both (i) protect the individual against adversity through sustaining well-being and the different forms of capitals at times of stress; and (ii) be the engine for transforming lives through the new opportunities offered. These mechanisms reside in further learning and qualifications, in the labour market through enhanced employability and in the family and community through enhanced capability.

Mixed methods

None of these advances would have been possible without the sustained commitment of the Centre from its beginning to the use of 'mixed methods' to build the evidence base. This was achieved by moving from one research mode to the next while ensuring that all research staff were equally at home in all of them. Their uses included exploration of learning biographies through extensive field work in different locations and, more recently, identifying individual cases within the framework established by statistical modeling for case study follow-up.

Accordingly, one session of the conference was devoted to methodological coordination and integration, sharing the opportunity to explore these issues with colleagues from our sister DfES Centre in the Institute of Education, the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). This brought into the picture experimental approaches, with which the Centre has yet to engage, alongside the survey, biographical and ethnographic investigations on which the work has so far rested. We were fortunate to be able to start proceedings with a talk by Glen Elder, one of the pioneers of life course research, who showed

how the analysis of a range of different kinds of data were used to identify the differential impact of learning opportunities for different age cohorts of US men recruited into the army in the second world war. The historical setting of the research demonstrated the timelessness of life course processes that are as central to policy today as they were after the massive traumas and social upheavals that followed in the war's wake. Education worked then and it works now but how and why depends on its timing and the context in which it takes place.

The three papers from researchers in the WBL Centre

These approaches to theory and method are reflected further in the three papers in this volume by WBL researchers. Hammond and Feinstein focus on the notion of personal self-efficacy, an individual's sense of capability or empowerment over their life (Bandura, 1977, 1997). They draw on the National Child Development Study (NCDS) longitudinal dataset of children born in the UK in 1958 and show that individuals who left school without qualifications are not heavily at risk of low self-efficacy unless they have also experienced disengagement from learning at school, as evidenced by truancy, conduct problems or reported dislike of school during childhood. In other words the relationship of self-efficacy and qualifications is not explained just by the signaling effect of poor educational performance, but is part of a lifelong process that relates strongly to the individual's own capabilities and also indicates the long-term effects of disengagement during the school years. Adult learning appears to off-set these earlier effects but not sufficiently to restore self-efficacy relative to the population as a whole. Partly this is because the effects of adult learning are small relative to the compounded and long-term effects of school-age experience, but also because those with low self-efficacy are unlikely to engage in adult learning. The authors draw on fieldwork research to tease out the possible causal connections underlying these long-term associations.

Preston, Feinstein and Anderson focus on the issue of personal attitudes—key building blocks of social cohesion. They find that adult learning is associated with the sustenance of non-racist, non-authoritarian positions, potentially a substantial social benefit of adult learning. Adult learning is less effective in shifting towards tolerance those whose attitudes are expressly racist, to the extent of voting for extreme nationalist parties such as, in the British context, the British National Party (BNP).

Duckworth and Sabates draw on the Child Supplement of the NCDS to assess the importance of staying on at school for subsequent parenting skills, an aspect of the inter-generational transmission of advantage. Using the great array of control variables in the NCDS they find some probable effect of education on parenting. But most of the association of mothers' education with their subsequent parenting skills is due to the mothers' own attributes rather than to the extra education gained.

In other research the Centre has strengthened what have been fairly basic statistical modeling approaches, using econometric methods that are better able to approximate the conditions of experimental evaluation. Our intention in the work presented here has been different, namely to demonstrate empirically, and to conceptualize the

mechanisms for associations between learning and other features of development in widespread and diverse areas of the life course. In this context learning is defined much more broadly than simply literacy and numeracy or school age learning or skills, important though all those aspects are.

Causes and consequences

These papers in their different ways emphasize how learning and the experience of education are strongly influenced by context and structure. In econometric terms this suggests caution in the interpretation of estimated relationships as 'causal' effects. There is also always the problem to contend with of 'selection bias'. The association of the educational success of parents with their subsequent parenting skills, for example, reflects a set of underlying, confounding factors that lead ambitious, able or confident individuals to continue in the education system, rather than reflecting necessarily any specific added benefit of parenting in itself. Nevertheless the policy signals pointing to continuous educational intervention within a life long learning scenario are self-evident. Education is not delivered under the conditions of a 'randomized controlled trial' (RCT). But the choices of individuals, and the constraints and opportunities created by the contexts through which they pass and the capabilities they acquire, lead to barriers and supports for education that policy must address if it is to support individuals in education and offset its risks. This is the basis for identifying the key policy target of *turning points* (Elder, 1998): changes in provision and opportunities—from Educational Maintenance Allowances to Connexions—that enable individuals to 'buck the trend'.

Thus, where negative experience of schooling reduces self-efficacy it is possible as Hammond and Feinstein show that adult learning might help to revive it. But it would be far better if the original experience of schooling had to the greatest extent possible been sufficiently appropriate to the needs, capabilities and aspirations of those who experience it. The child with properly targeted advice and guidance, appropriate pedagogy and relevant curricula, tracking and qualifications would then be less likely to be damaged by the initial experience in the first place.

But the capacity of individuals to respond to new learning contexts and opportunities should never be underestimated: *never too early, never too late* (e.g. see Bynner, 2001). Lifelong learning and its concomitant, the *learning society*, is therefore not an option in the modern state but a necessity (Coffield, 2000). This fundamental point should be made as familiar to practitioners as it should be to policy-makers. As another of our policy speakers Andrew Morris argued, in his contribution to a policy session, communication of findings to the audiences who need them is as important as the research process itself.

Adult learning can thus play a critical role in the sustenance of positive pathways or help in the transformation of adverse circumstances into successful outcomes, but this is as dependent on good educational provision and contexts as it is for school learning. This calls for improved pedagogy and curricula and a greater degree of support for adult learners to enable them to achieve their learning goals. As Richard

Bartholomew[2] argued in the last of the conferences policy discussions, such 'personalization' of learning requires broader training of education professionals, drawing on a wider range of skills, talents from a wider range of professions than just teaching, and sound practice based in the research evidence. Access to education can undoubtedly provide tremendous opportunities for benefit across many domains of adult life. But all learning is not entirely without risks. Provision that is inappropriate to individual needs, experience of damaging failure, unequal access to opportunities or identity shifts can rupture families and social ties as well as build them.

Thus, the research of the Centre is not just about the benefits that learning can bring but supports a focus on provision and the development of structures and processes (teaching and learning) that can benefit individuals, families and society. There is still much to do, which takes us to the next three years.

The next three years

Research in the next phase of the WBL Centre's work is organized in three distinct but related programme areas, each of which represents an important and clearly demarcated policy domain with specific and often unconnected groups of policy interests. These three areas are broadly concerned with effects (i) at the level of the individual; (ii) in families; and (iii) at the level of communities. As will have become clear, these areas are linked in important but complex ways. Such integration is a major theme of the new work. We find it useful to pursue specific research projects in each of the three areas but are also working to achieve synthesis across these three programme areas by exploring the interactions between them. We return to some of the cross-cutting issues after first briefly describing these three programme areas.

Health: the individual-level effects of learning

Health is interpreted to encompass wider notions such as happiness, efficacy and confidence as well as aspects of the consumption of education in lifestyle choices. These are all areas in which, as we know from the earlier work, education has substantial benefits. Some of these benefits, such as the effect of education in reducing the risk of depression, can be evaluated in terms of reduced NHS expenditures and other social and personal costs. Others have less immediately pecuniary implications but nonetheless contribute greatly to well-being and therefore can be assessed in terms of the methods of evaluation required in the Treasury *Green book* (H.M. Treasury, 2003) for non-monetary benefits.

The preventative benefits of education are an explicit theme of the recent H.M. Treasury-funded Wanless review on public health (Wanless, 2004). Interactions between health and education are a major area of potential in cross-departmental activity and a key focus of the programme. Learning at all stages of the life course can bring health benefits as well as risks but much more research is needed on the extent to which either is the case, in what circumstances and what the implications are for pedagogy, school management and funding.

Family-level effects of learning

This programme area is concerned with the impact of learning on families and with the inter-generational transmission of educational advantage and disadvantage. This includes the links between education, income, parenting and other factors in supporting educational success. The 'Every Child Matters' legislation has brought protective services for children together with educational services in Children's Trusts. This is an opportunity for the integration of activities targeted simultaneously at children's education and at broader personal development. This may have implications for teacher training and school management as well as for service delivery and we are investigating the ways in which these different aspects of child development interact with each other and with social institutions such as schools.

We will continue to analyse the inter-generational benefits of educational success and will also assess the extent to which adult learning can also bring about benefits for the next generation.

Community-level effects of learning

The three main foci in this strand are (i) crime; (ii) anti-social behaviour; and (iii) community development. Research in this strand is addressing the protective or sustaining value of learning against the negative outcomes of social disintegration, alienation and especially crime. Other issues of policy concern—such as the potential role of learning in supporting protective strategies and resilience in relation to drug use, vandalism and youth crime, particularly in economically run down localities—are also a focus.

Ethnographic research in this strand is being developed both to elucidate theories about the relationship between educational institutions and social networks between and within social groups as well as to deepen understanding of the difficulties and value of developing interventions or investments in highly mobile, diverse and disadvantaged communities. This work will provide a context for conceptualization and evaluation of policy interventions such as extended schools, family learning programmes and children's centres.

As stated above, in advancing the integrative aims of the programme there are a number of important research themes that cut across strands.

Learning through the life course

The main conceptual framework of WBL research continues to be life course study. But in place of the focus previously on adult learning using earlier learning outcomes principally as controls in modeling the effects of later learning we now pursue the effects of learning through the whole life course. That requires a consideration of learning at each stage of life, i.e., pre-school, primary school, secondary school, 14–19 and HE as well as adult learning and learning in later life.

As well as consideration of learning in each stage we also focus on continuities and discontinuities in progression across stages such as primary, secondary and so on. Much policy is structured to focus on stages because of the institutional boundaries that separate them. WBL research can therefore be particularly useful in considering how the stages relate and in assessing cross-cutting issues embracing more than one stage, such as transitions, engagement, progression and the implications of returns to investments at different stages for resource allocation. The broad focus is on trajectories, or pathways, of educational development and a consideration of how children from different backgrounds, with different attributes and apparent abilities, move onto different types of pathway through the educational system. The policy concern is to know what the implications of these pathways are for subsequent well-being, participation in learning and adult life outcomes.

Interactive contexts

Individuals live and learn in multi-faceted and related contexts and these contexts interact. The interactions of these contexts are an important feature of the environments in which policy must be delivered and so understanding and evaluation of these interactions can be useful for policy-makers. For example, family background interacts with schooling in important ways, the two contexts (i) working well together to support educational progression, (ii) operating in opposition; or (iii) reinforcing negative outcomes. The Centre is studying these interactions and considering their importance for the attainment and engagement of young people and the wider benefits that follow. Other contexts are also important, such as peer groups and out-of-school leisure settings, childcare and neighbourhoods.

Capitals, capabilities and the multi-dimensionality of learning outcomes

We define educational success broadly to include outcomes such as the enjoyment of learning, the attainment of understanding, good relations with peers and so on, as well as qualifications. Thus, the WBL research programme is concerned not just with longer-term benefits of learning that range more broadly than productivity, employment and earnings, but also with immediate outcomes of learning experiences that range more broadly than skills development or qualifications attained.

The model is one in which learning has multiple aims leading to the development of individuals and communities in a range of domains. As we have noted earlier, these are usefully conceptualized in terms of *capitals* and *capabilities.* Capital refers to the stocks of skills, relational assets and psychological attributes that individuals, communities and even countries have at their disposal to yield learning returns. Capabilities refer to the potential to, or freedom to, achieve well-being (Schuller *et al.*, 2004a). It is because learning experiences can support the development of these wide-ranging stocks of human and societal potential that it can lead to such important and diverse wider benefits. We are continuing to develop conceptualization, research and debate on the way these somewhat complex concepts are theorized and the relations between

them understood. Such conceptual work is important because it supplies the means of developing the firm theoretical foundations on which deeper understanding of the wider outcomes of learning is most likely to come.

Learning and wider society

The effects of learning also depend on the social, economic and cultural context of learning. In the economic sphere, for example, returns to education depend on the demand for and supply of skills and vary, therefore with technological development and wider economic growth. The returns to learning are not all due to the learning obtained and the associated development of cognitive and other skills at the level of the individual learner. To some extent they depend on the position of the learner in the distribution of skills in the wider economy. In the sphere of social cohesion, learning experiences shape identity and citizenship formation. That is to say learning develops the individual resources of knowledge, values and skills, which underpin identity, trust, tolerance, cooperation, civic engagement and other behaviours which may be conducive towards social cohesion. However, at the same time wider social, institutional and cultural contexts enable or constrain learning effects and provide structural conditions for cohesion at the societal level. Therefore, another major concern of the research is to understand the way in which social structures promote access to and the distribution of skills in such a way as to impact on social mobility, equality and social cohesion.

Continuity and synthesis

This paper has set the scene for research on the wider benefits of learning, described the themes of the conference celebrating the first five years work, which informed the papers presented there, and has outlined the work that is being pursued in the next phase of the programme. The work described reflects the steady advances made in the largely uncharted research territory in which the WBL Centre began its life. There is continuity of the work on the effects of learning in the domains of well-being, family functioning and social cohesion at individual and communal levels. There is also development of more targeted studies, together with cross-cutting investigations using multiple methods and advanced modeling approaches, through which a fully integrated body of knowledge will grow.

The driving force has always been, and will continue to be, the policy questions that are central to the maintenance and improvement of well-being in the context of contemporary society. But well-founded answers to these questions can be answered only by research that not only supplies the contemporary facts—even the 'killer facts' on which politics thrives—but also the deeper understanding gained through sound conceptualization anchored in evidence. Such evidence embraces the interactions of individuals and the contexts in which their lives unfold and the multiple ways in which learning can ameliorate, sustain, transform or impede the life course processes involved.

This is where synthesis has the strongest part to play. Highly targeted hypothesis-driven studies give robust and generalizable answers to specific questions. Intensive ethnographic or biographical case studies help elucidate the meaning of action in specific settings. Cross-cutting enquiries are needed to gain new theoretical insights and break new conceptual ground. The WBL research programme seeks such triangulating synthesis: between results obtained from applying different methodological approaches to the same research problem; between research findings collected at different levels and in different contexts; between applications of different modeling methods, measurement techniques and observational regimes; and most of all between policy-makers' ideas and the conceptualizations of researchers.

Part of the task is to problematize what is taken for granted in the everyday discourse in which the different constituencies operate. We need both to learn from and to challenge history in policy thinking and unpick the shifting meanings of critical terms of which 'learning' and 'skills' are just two examples. But perhaps most important of all we need to find the best means of communicating across the divides between research, policy and practice that will lead to optimum courses of action. These are the aims which inspired the WBL research programme and the papers to which this edition of the journal is directed.

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Notes

1. The WBL Centre, established in October 1999, is sponsored by the UK Department for Education and Skills.
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