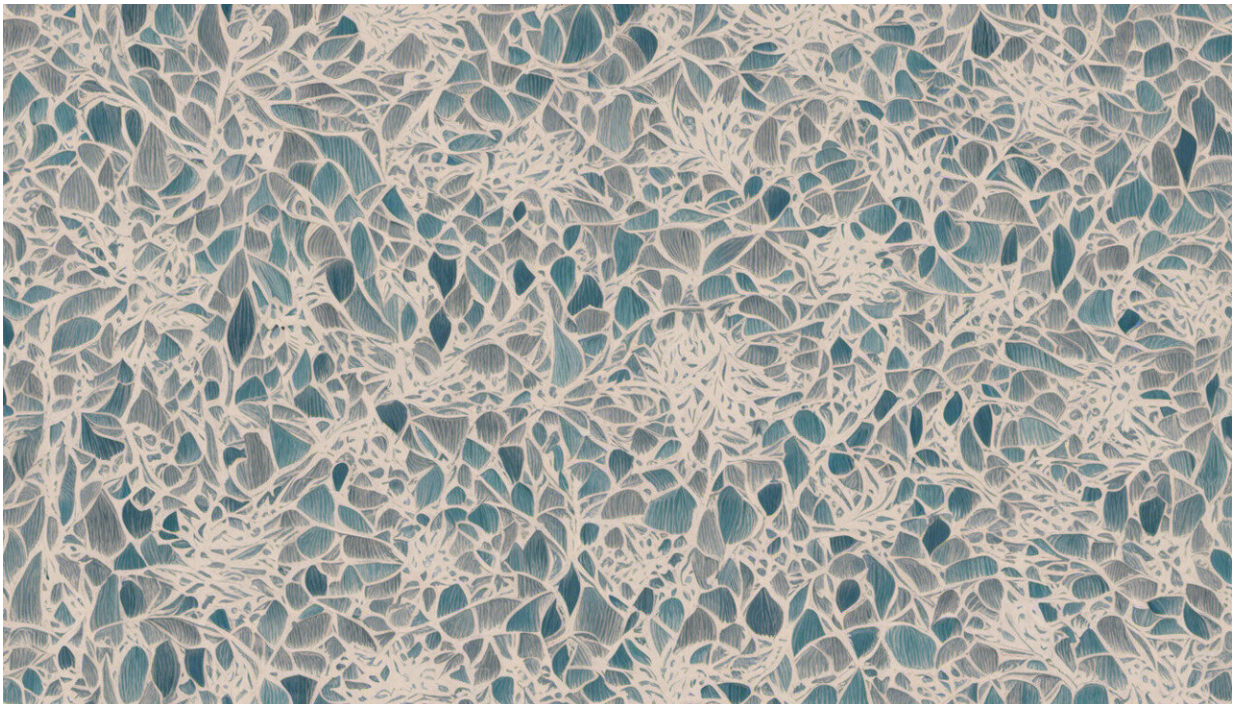


Pupils 'held back' academically by their social background

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(Phys.org) —Children of similar intelligence have very different levels of educational attainment depending on their social backgrounds, says a long-term study led by Oxford University researchers.

The research team studied 5,000 children born in Britain and Sweden

from the 1940s to the 1970s. They found that the bright children from advantaged social backgrounds were twice as likely to achieve A-levels as similarly able children from the least advantaged social backgrounds.

The researchers from the University's Department of Social Policy and Intervention, and the Swedish Institute for Social Research, Stockholm, studied the test scores measuring cognitive ability of children aged between 10 and 13, and found they had a strong effect on a [child's](#) subsequent educational performance. However, a child's [social background](#) was also found to have a strong effect over and above that of ability, with the parents' education being more important than their social status and social class, though the latter also count. The study finds that the effect of a child's social background on their attainment levels did not decline in Britain or Sweden, despite the introduction of policies over the years to promote a greater equality of educational opportunity.

A child's social background was just as important – if not more important – for the brightest children as for those with lower ability, says the study. Children born in Britain in 1970 who were in the top fifth in terms of ability but from least advantaged social backgrounds had a 40% chance of achieving A-levels (or equivalents), while the chance of similarly able children from most advantaged backgrounds was around 80%.

The researchers point to two major implications of their findings. First, even if variation in intelligence is taken to be largely genetically determined – which they argue is increasingly disputable – it still remains the case that children's family environments and resources are major factors in how well they do academically at school. Second, the fact that bright children were unable to fully realise their academic potential because of their social backgrounds indicates a substantial waste of human resources, the study concludes.

Lead author Dr Erzsébet Bukodi said: 'The level of education achieved by the child's parents appears to determine how the child performs at school in later years. This has a bigger effect than the parents' class or status, or indeed whether that child is academically bright as measured in cognitive ability tests. We see that in both the British and Swedish educational systems, even the very brightest children are hampered if they come from a disadvantaged background. It is possible of course that clever individuals choose other ways of getting on in the world than through education, but the fact remains that many children in British and Swedish schools do not appear to have fulfilled their academic potential.'

Professor John Goldthorpe said: 'If we compare the two countries, we see that in Britain if the child was both bright and from an advantaged background, they did particularly well academically. While, in Sweden, we find children of low ability but from advantaged backgrounds do better than they would have done in Britain. The two educational systems in a way cancel out each other, suggesting that Sweden is not significantly ahead of Britain in providing opportunity for [children](#) of different social backgrounds. This study raises the question of how far it is possible for educational policies alone to promote greater social mobility.'

More information: [www.spi.ox.ac.uk/uploads/media ...
rnettPaper_13-04.pdf](http://www.spi.ox.ac.uk/uploads/media...rnettPaper_13-04.pdf)

Provided by Oxford University

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