

Educational success among children of similar cognitive ability depends on their background

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Britain's got talent—but we're still wasting it. That's the main finding of a new report by researchers from Oxford University published today.

Children of similar cognitive ability have very different chances of

educational success; it still depends on their parents' economic, socio-cultural and educational resources. This contradicts a commonly held view that these days that our [education system](#) has developed enough to give everyone a fighting chance.

The researchers, led by Dr. Erzsébet Bukodi from Oxford's Department of Social Policy and Intervention, looked at data from cohorts of [children](#) born in three decades: 1950s, 1970s and 1990s. They found significant evidence of a wastage of talent. Individuals with high levels of cognitive ability but who are disadvantaged in their social origins are persistently unable to translate their ability into educational attainment to the same extent as their more advantaged counterparts.

The research, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, found that only about half of the difference in educational attainment between children from advantaged and disadvantaged parental backgrounds is due to differences in their cognitive ability. The other half is due to other factors associated with their backgrounds.

"If we compare the [educational attainment](#) of children born in the 1990s to those in the late 1950s and early 1970s, we see that parent's economic resources have become a less important factor, but their socio-cultural and educational resources have grown in significance," says Dr. Bukodi. "That means that your parents' place in society and their own level of education still play a big part in how well you may do."

These experts are now calling for policy-makers to acknowledge that formal qualifications are only one channel for upward mobility for high-ability individuals of disadvantaged backgrounds. Dr. Bukodi says: "These findings show that there are limits to how far inequalities of opportunity can be reduced through educational policy alone. Changes in educational policy aren't having the impact we want." Apart from education, job training programmes, promotions or becoming self-

employed in higher-level occupations are important channels for upward mobility.

Bukodi co-authored a recent book on this issue with Dr. John Goldthorpe who commented that, "The real mobility problem is that [upward mobility](#) is falling while downward mobility is rising. Young people now face less favourable mobility prospects than their parents or grandparents." If we are to reverse that trend, we need to look beyond formal [education](#) to find other channels for success.

More information: Erzsébet Bukodi and John H Goldthorpe. Social Mobility and Education in Britain. Cambridge University Press, 2018. doi.org/10.1017/9781108567404

Bukodi, E., et al. Social Origins, Cognitive Ability, Educational Attainment and Social Class Position in Britain: A Birth Cohort and Life-Course Perspective, University of Oxford. 2019. [www.oxes.org.uk/wordpress/wp-c ... aper-for-website.pdf](http://www.oxes.org.uk/wordpress/wp-c...aper-for-website.pdf)

Provided by University of Oxford

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