

26 JANUARY SEMINAR: “SETTING THE SCENE”

John Bynner
Longview

1. Themes of the series:

- a. Changes in educational policy thinking and role of assumptions about ability in it since the war
- b. Empirical evidence – and its limitations - for investigating changes in cognitive ability over this period and explanations for them using the internationally unique set of research resources vested in the British birth cohorts - a goldmine of life histories dating back to 1946 - Mike Wadsworth.
- c. What we can learn from these findings in relation to our understanding of ‘cognitive capital’ and its use in education and social policy

2. Why cognitive capital?

The whole series will be concerned with the illumination and ramifications of this key term and the phenomena it represents. But first a few words about the reasons for shifting the emphasis from ideas of ‘ability’ with connotations of a relatively fixed and immutable attribute to the economists’ more malleable term, ‘capital’. In economics *capital* refers to the stock of reproducible (mainly tangible) assets that contribute to the production of goods and services - or further ‘that which is, or has been, invested to produce a return’. Cognitive assets in this sense combine the cognitive functions, reasoning, memory and so on the individual possesses, traditionally identified with ‘intelligence’, and those of the family in which the individual grows up. If we are to apply sensibly the term capital to cognitive assets this implies five requirements:

- a. *Investment* - CC is invested directly in education or indirectly through the education of others such as children
- b. *Value of stock* - CC value is identified with the level of cognitive test performance
- c. *Ownership* - CC can be retained or passed to (shared with) others through the teaching and learning of cognitive skills
- d. *Returns* - CC realises tangible returns through educational achievement as embodied in qualifications (the basis of human capital) supplying the basis of employability - and other less tangible returns such as self efficacy, civic participation and well-being
- e. *Distribution* - CC is distributed unequally with the inequality structured by class, gender and so on
- f. *Fungibility* - CC can be converted into other forms of capital, such as human capital, and converted from others such as financial capital

3. Structure of the Seminar

Seminar 1 will set the scene for the investigation with three overviews followed by policy debate:

- a. the birth cohort studies – Mike Wadsworth
- b. education and social policy since the second world war – Gill Sutherland, Newnham College Cambridge
- c. theory and measurement of ability – Marcus Richards, NSHD-MRC; Ian Deary, University of Edinburgh

