About the research

Against the odds: influences on the post-school success of ‘low performers’

Sue Thomson and Kylie Hillman, Australian Council for Educational Research

The link between academic performance and labour market outcomes is well established. People who are low academic performers are more likely to leave school early, limiting their access to higher occupational status jobs and therefore higher earnings, or placing them at greater risk of unemployment or underemployment.

But does poor performance in a test of literacy necessarily compromise later success? Using the 2003 cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), Thomson and Hillman examine this question. ‘Success’ in this context encompasses satisfaction with life, together with the extent to which young people are fully occupied with education, employment or a combination of these.

The researchers have extrapolated from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results of the 2003 LSAY cohort to consider how those with poor numeracy (the main focus of the 2003 PISA test) cope during their transitions from school.

Key messages

- Academic under-achievement is not the end of the road for most students, with almost three-quarters of those who were ‘low performers’ at age 15 years going on to make a successful transition into full-time work or study (or a combination of these).
- Motivation is a key determinant of students’ later outcomes, with those who see the value of study such as mathematics for their future success more likely to achieve this success.
- Ensuring that the school experience is a positive one for low-performing students may be a challenging task, but can be worth the effort, with positive impacts on young people’s lives at the time they are at school, and, it appears, once they have left school.
- Low-performing students from socioeconomically disadvantaged households are less likely to be successful than their more affluent counterparts, suggesting that the degree to which parents can help their children may be a factor.
- Having some sort of career or strategic plan, such as aspiring to do an apprenticeship, is particularly important for determining later success in life.

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