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Lessons Britain won't learn.

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Britain's long standing educational problems need no rehearsing here. What is not understood however is the extent to which the nature of these problems and their likely solution are now coming into focus. Nor is it understood the extent to which this has been achieved by academics pursuing the cause of Britain's poor comparative record in mathematics. Academics who have followed their research into some very unlikely corners of education, not least, foreign kindergartens and British nurseries. In doing so they have transformed our understanding of British education. A new understanding is emerging – based partly on new US research as well – which offers the prospect of far reaching improvements. At the heart of all this is a new understanding about early years education. Until 1990 the available evidence made British early years education a confused backwater about which it was difficult to say anything very useful. Since then the new evidence – uncovered largely by those interested in mathematical education – has transformed any evaluation of its likely potential: their work suggests this is the area of education on which all else depends. The transformation in understanding is startling but – for a complex of reasons – has been all but ignored by the British Department of Education and by agencies concerned with education, particularly Ofsted. Until this changes, improvement in British education will, at best, be fitful and partial: leaving the bottom 30–40% of children ever further behind. The paper briefly describes the new evidence, offers suggestions as to why it has not been acted upon and sets out the policy implications that it raises. The paper is based on five years research by its authors David and Clare Mills for television programmes and books they are preparing.

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