



Make Child Poverty History? Yes We Can

by Bernie Froese-Germain

What do we know about the relationship between education and poverty? Ben Levin and Jane Gaskell, principal investigators of a SSHRC-funded research project on urban poverty and Canadian schools, have this to say about it:

Socio-economic status continues to be the most important single determinant of educational and social outcomes, and Canada's cities continue to have high levels of disparity in income. Poverty has only occasionally reached the forefront of education policy discussion and, even then, the actions arising are usually modest and often uncoordinated. Although poverty is not created by schools, and the problems of poverty cannot be resolved by schools, there are steps schools can take to understand the issue more fully and to cope with it more effectively. [<http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~blevin/poverty.htm>]

Indeed, an important step in furthering our understanding according to OISE/UT professor Joseph Flessa is to resist the temptation to frame the relationship between poverty and schooling in simplistic terms, as one characterized by problems with only either/or solutions. The reality is that conditions and influences both inside *and* outside the schools matter. [[http://cus.oise.utoronto.ca/UserFiles/File/Poverty%20lit%20review%20\(J_%20Flessa%20-%202010_2007\).pdf](http://cus.oise.utoronto.ca/UserFiles/File/Poverty%20lit%20review%20(J_%20Flessa%20-%202010_2007).pdf)]

Flessa, in a literature review on poverty and education prepared for the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), discusses some of the strategies that schools and school systems can undertake to mitigate the effects of poverty on learning – for example, school staffing in terms of “advocating for more effective recruitment, selection, preparation, and placement of teachers for schools affected by poverty” as well as teacher education programs that support new teachers to be “agents of social change”; improvements to curriculum and assessment (recognizing that in the “current accountability environment” an emphasis on standardized testing disproportionately hurts disadvantaged students); school structures including the creation of genuine professional learning communities and nurturing a strong sense of community within schools; and strengthening school-community connections including relationships with parents.

The impact of school fees on poor students and their families for a range of services and supplies – including student activities, labs, art supplies, music and athletic programs, workbooks, agendas, outdoor education programs, field trips – is significant, underscoring the connection between underfunding of schools and inequity and exclusion. People for Education notes that such fees “force many families to choose between a number of unpleasant options: pay the fee and experience financial hardship, go through the sometimes demeaning process of requesting help from the school to cover the costs, or have their child miss the enrichment program and possibly feel stigmatized.” [<http://www.peopleforeducation.com/reportonschools08>]

The importance of high quality early childhood education including full-day kindergarten has also proven beneficial for children from poorer families. Vivian McCaffrey, in her article in this issue of *PD Perspectives (PDP)*, cites the OECD in this regard: “International research from a wide



range of countries shows that early intervention contributes significantly to putting children from low-income families on the path to development and success in school.”

Another educational strategy that has been shown to benefit student learning, especially for disadvantaged students, is class size reduction, particularly in the primary grades. In this issue of *PDP* Bascia and Fredua-Kwarteng report that for “students in populations that traditionally have not done as well in school, such as high-poverty and visible minority groups, immigrants, and students attending inner-city schools The potential for improvement in learning is even greater for these students than for those whose socio-economic profiles suggest they are likely to do well.”

There’s strong public support for class size reduction. Canadian Teachers’ Federation polling shows that a majority of Canadians has consistently ranked class size reduction as the top spending priority in K-12 education since 1997. [<http://www.ctf-fce.ca/e/news/news.asp?id=1215721914>]

Class size reduction – thoughtfully implemented – must go hand-in-hand with class composition, giving special consideration to the degree of student diversity including factors such as socio-economic status, language and cultural background and numbers of special needs students, and viewed as a teacher working conditions issue. In terms of the specific benefits of class size reduction for teachers’ work, Bascia and Fredua-Kwarteng found that,

teachers of small classes report that they are more confident about their ability to identify and meet students’ learning needs, and they express greater job satisfaction than teachers with larger classes. They report that they spend more time teaching and have more interactions with parents than they had with larger classes, and that students’ behavior improves, as does their engagement with classroom activities.

This would go a long way towards improving the quality of education – well beyond higher test scores – for all students, and especially disadvantaged children.

What all this boils down to is the fact that strong public schools make the greatest positive difference in the learning and lives of the most disadvantaged students, and that is a critically important part of what public education is all about.

Towards a national poverty reduction strategy

Campaign 2000 turns 20 this year – although there may not be much celebrating, given that the anti-poverty coalition, a cross-Canada network of 120 national, provincial and community partner organizations, was created as a way of holding federal politicians accountable for their promise, way back in 1989, to eliminate child poverty in Canada by the year 2000, a promise they haven’t kept for two long decades. Despite more than a decade of strong economic growth, the national child poverty rate is essentially unchanged from 1989 (see “Snapshot of Child & Family Poverty in Canada” in this issue of *PDP*).

There may however be reason for optimism.

Internationally there are encouraging developments on the poverty reduction front (this comes from a report by the National Council of Welfare, *Solving Poverty: Four Cornerstones of a Workable National Strategy for Canada*, 2007 – <http://www.ncwcnbes.net/>):

- The European Union has put in place a framework that views poverty, not as an isolated problem, but rather one to be tackled within a broad economic, social and political context.
- Sweden which has very low poverty rates compared to Canada “has set itself the objective of becoming the world’s best country in which to grow old.”
- The UK plans to cut child poverty in half in Britain by 2010, eliminate it by 2020, and create affordable child care spaces for all children aged 3-14 by 2010.
- Ireland adopted a 10-year National Anti-Poverty Strategy in 1997 that has since resulted in significant declines in poverty including child poverty.
- New Zealand, a country similar to Canada in having large Aboriginal and immigrant populations, has taken an approach to social development which emphasizes both social protection and social investment, and the need to focus more on its disadvantaged populations.
- Among the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, halving by 2015 the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day, and achieve universal primary education for both boys and girls by 2015.

Here at home, some promising provincial initiatives exist in Quebec and Newfoundland/Labrador. The Quebec government adopted a law in 2002, the *Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion*; the impetus for the law came from the grassroots level by a broad-based citizens' movement, the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec. The government has committed to investing \$3.3 billion over five years to increase the incomes of welfare recipients and low-income earners. In Newfoundland/Labrador, following a promise in the 2005 throne speech to reduce poverty to the lowest level of any province by 2015, the government released *Reducing Poverty: An Action Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador* in 2006 which includes among its objectives an increased emphasis on early childhood development and a better educated population – over \$90 million annually in new funding will be invested to prevent, reduce and alleviate poverty (see presentation by Katherine Scott of the Canadian Council on Social Development – http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2007/upp/CACL_Conference-November_08.pdf).

A strong majority of Canadians believe our political leaders at the federal and provincial level need to set concrete targets and timelines for poverty reduction, and that taking action on poverty is especially important in a recession.

A recent national poll on public perceptions of poverty, conducted by Environics Research for the CCPA's Inequality Project (see Trish Hennessy's article in this issue of *PDP*), found that a strong majority of Canadians believe our political leaders at the federal and provincial level need to set concrete targets and timelines for poverty reduction, and that taking action on poverty is especially important in a recession.

According to Marcel Lauzière, CCSD President, we are "reaching a critical mass" on the need to seriously address poverty in this country for a couple of reasons. One reason as noted is a growing recognition, demonstrated by the international experience, that far from being inevitable and intractable, "poverty *can* be significantly reduced". Another is that, as Lauzière remarks,

the constituency to fight poverty has grown and diversified. More people are realizing that poverty must be addressed not only for reasons of social

justice. Many are motivated to do something about poverty in Canada because they want to strengthen our economic development, improve our health outcomes and reduce expenditures, raise the educational achievement of our children, or help reduce crime. Now, individuals, organizations and governments are coming to the issue of poverty for a multiplicity of reasons, and that's a good thing. [http://www.ccsd.ca/perception/2934/perception_2934.pdf]

Teachers' organizations are among this growing constituency. ETFO for example has done a considerable amount of work in terms of conducting research and raising awareness of the links between poverty and schooling. It has produced *One in Six*, an educational video and accompanying booklet featuring the stories of Ontarians affected by poverty, distributed to every elementary school in the province; created opportunities for professional learning on poverty issues through the medium of theatre with the play *Danny, King of the Basement*; delivered *Beyond the Breakfast Program* workshops on the impact of poverty to ETFO teacher locals; held a symposium on poverty and education in November 2008; and as noted above commissioned a literature review on poverty and schools.

Given strong public support and the growing momentum to reduce poverty both internationally and within Canada in terms of provincial initiatives, the lack of a comprehensive *national* strategy to combat child and family poverty with targets and timelines – and the lack of federal leadership necessary to move such a strategy forward – is becoming more conspicuous by its absence.

Emphasizing that what "Canada lacks [is] action, not good ideas" on dealing with poverty and insecurity, the National Council of Welfare proposes these four "cornerstones" or elements of a national anti-poverty strategy:

1. a long-term vision accompanied by measurable timelines and targets;
2. a plan of action to coordinate initiatives within and across government departments and other partners, with the necessary human and financial resources for its implementation;
3. a government accountability structure for carrying out the plan; and
4. a set of accepted poverty indicators to measure results.

According to Sherri Torjman at the Caledon Institute of Social Policy,

Because there is no single measure that fully addresses the problem, a robust poverty strategy involves a combination of *safety net* elements that help offset the impact of low income and *springboard* components that create opportunities for success over the longer term Not surprisingly, education and literacy are the most important springboards out of poverty. Knowledge and learning are keys that unlock the doors to both economic wealth and social well-being. [http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/720ENG.pdf]

In addition to investing in the powerful springboard of education at all levels from early childhood education through to post-secondary education and training, a poverty reduction strategy would require investments in affordable housing, universal child care, income support and replacement programs (and an expansion of eligibility for Employment Insurance), and higher minimum wages (see Laurel Rothman's article in this issue of *PDP*).

Effective within-school strategies to counter the effects of poverty must be coupled with comprehensive coordinated poverty reduction strategies at the national and provincial level.

Canada appears to be at a critical juncture. There's no doubt that ending child poverty is doable – it makes sound economic sense (given the enormous financial costs wrought by poverty), it leaves an enduring political legacy (something that can't be ignored), there's good momentum including solid public support to move forward on this issue now, and oh yes, it's the right thing to do – eradicating poverty is a basic human right.

Bernie Froese-Germain is a Researcher with the Canadian Teachers' Federation in Ottawa.

Erratum

In the article on the CTF Gender and Leadership Survey from the Fall 2008 issue of *PD Perspectives*, the composition of the NSTU Executive Staff (see Table 1 on p. 16) was incorrectly reported as 30% female – it is actually 40% female. We apologize for any confusion this may have caused.

Engaged Teachers, Engaged Learners

The third in a series of CEA's ground-breaking symposia exploring teaching and learning in a changing world

April 30 — May 2, 2009 | The Sutton Place Hotel, Edmonton, Alberta

Keynote Presentations



Convening Conversations about Learning and Teaching: What does high quality learning look like?

Richard Lemons | Director of the Institute for Urban School Improvement – University of Connecticut

How can we support collaborative and focused professional discussions about learning and teaching in the classroom? Using his experience as Associate Director of the **Harvard Change Leadership Group**, Lemons will lead an examination of such discussions of large-scale instructional change efforts within school cultures.



Creating Our Teaching Stories

Kathy Gould Lundy | Destination Arts, York University

The Art Director for the acclaimed CEA project *Imagine a school...* will lead participants in a reflective and responsive session about what it means to teach.



Teachers as Learners

Jim Parsons | University of Alberta

The 2007 co-winner of the Alberta Teachers' Association Education Research Award draws on his experience with the **Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)** to outline the conditions and factors that help teachers learn throughout their careers.



Please join us for a conversation that matters to all Canadian educators – What do we know about teaching and what will we do with what we know?



The Alberta Teachers' Association



For more information and to register online, please visit:
www.cea-ace.ca/edmontonsymposium