



BERNIE FROESE-GERMAIN

Make Child Poverty History? Yes We Can.

Examining the relationship
between education and poverty

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:

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.

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, characterized by problems with only either/or solutions. The reality is that conditions and influences both inside and outside the schools matter.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

The connection between student/family socioeconomic status (SES) and educational outcomes in U.S. schools is summed up in the title of a recent article in *Phi Delta Kappan* — “Class matters — In and out of school” in which the authors, Boyd-Zaharias and Pate-Bain (p. 41), state:

Low achievement and dropping out are problems rooted in social and economic inequality — a force more powerful than curricula, teaching practices, standardized tests, or other school-related policies. Richard Rothstein summed it up best:

For nearly half a century, the association of social and economic disadvantage with the student achievement gap has been well known to economists, sociologists, and educators. Most, however, have avoided the obvious implication of this understanding — raising the achievement of lower-class children requires amelioration of the social and economic conditions of their lives, not just school reform.

Educational reform without also addressing socioeconomic conditions is described as “profoundly counterproductive”, creating what Flessa describes as the false perception “on the one hand, that schools can do nothing, and on the other hand that schools can do everything. The challenge, therefore, is to tell a consistent story about the importance of school initiatives in the context of other mutually supportive social policies” (p. 37).

In a literature review on poverty and education prepared for the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO), Flessa 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” (p. 10).

ECE including full-day kindergarten has also proven beneficial for children from poorer families.

The importance of high quality early childhood education (ECE) including full-day kindergarten has also proven beneficial for children from poorer families. Vivian McCaffrey (2008) 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.”

On the importance of kindergarten, Cleveland et al. (2006) in a review of the state of the field of early childhood learning and development report that,

What happens before and during kindergarten seems to set the foundation for what is to follow in a child’s school experience. Early predispositions and achievements in kindergarten predict long-term educational and adjustment outcomes. Children who begin school ahead of others in academic achievement tend to stay ahead. Furthermore, these children make greater gains over time due to the cumulative benefits of early learning, but also due to other factors such as teacher expectations, home factors and parent involvement (p. 3).

Debate is ongoing as to the best approach to take with kindergarten curriculum, which ranges from play-based learning to more didactic forms of learning.

Regarding the benefits of full-day versus half-day kindergarten programs, Cleveland et al. found that,

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

The bulk of the literature indicates that full-day programs have better child learning outcomes, particularly in literacy, and particularly for 'at risk' populations although the effects of the longer day cannot necessarily be considered causal. Canadian studies confirm that children who attend full-day kindergarten gain academically and demonstrate greater 'readiness' in Grade 1 In Canada, kindergarten class size varies greatly across provinces and territories. Generally, smaller class sizes are associated with greater social and academic gains among kindergarten children (p. 4).

Over the longer term, high quality ECE programs contribute to reductions in special education placements, grade retention, and high school dropout rates (Boyd-Zaharias & Pate-Bain, p. 42).

Enlightened social policy makes for smart economics. As economists Donner, McCracken and Yalnizyan (2008) remind us, "every dollar spent on early childhood education — key to school success for all children — eventually returns \$9 to the economy over time." Similarly, the Campaign 2000 report card on child and family poverty cites research in Québec which "calculated a 7% increase in mothers' labour force participation due to Québec's child care reforms. The same economic study calculated that — in a single year — increased government revenues from mothers' higher employment participation covered 40% of the cost of child care services."

Despite a solid case for ECE as good public policy, Canada has a poor track record in this area. In a 2008 UNICEF report on early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries, Canada ranked last on a series of 10 benchmarks ("international minimum standards"), meeting only one of the 10 — 50% of early education staff having the relevant qualifications. Among the benchmarks that Canada failed to meet were a national plan with priority for disadvantaged children, expenditure of 1% of GDP on early childhood services, and subsidized and accredited early education services for 80% of four year-olds. As always the Nordic countries lead the way. The report notes that "only six OECD countries meet eight or more of the benchmarks ... and they are the same six countries that top the table of government expenditures on early childhood services (Iceland, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, France, and Norway)" (p. 27).

Another educational strategy that has been shown to benefit student learning, especially for disadvantaged students, is class size reduction, particularly in the primary grades as noted. 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.”

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. It must also be 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.

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

All this boils down to 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 to hold federal politicians accountable for their promise, way back in 1989, to eliminate

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

child poverty in Canada by the year 2000, a promise politicians haven't kept for two long decades. Despite more than a decade of strong economic growth, the national child poverty rate remains essentially unchanged from 1989.

Internationally, however, there are encouraging developments on the poverty reduction front (see National Council of Welfare, 2007):

- 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. Early childhood development and care is one of the measures implemented to reach the poverty reduction targets.
- New Zealand, a country similar to Canada with its large Aboriginal and immigrant populations, has taken an approach to social development emphasizing both social protection and social investment, and the need to focus more on its disadvantaged populations.

Here at home, some promising provincial initiatives exist in Québec and Newfoundland/Labrador. In 2002 the Québec government adopted 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.

Its objectives include 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 (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2008).

Among the lessons learned from these various initiatives is that progress in reducing child poverty will require moving forward on early childhood education and development including child care.

A recent national poll on public perceptions of poverty, conducted by Environics Research for the CCPA's Inequality Project, 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, President of the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD), 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.

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*

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

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 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:

- a long-term vision accompanied by measurable timelines and targets;
- 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;
- a government accountability structure for carrying out the plan; and
- 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.

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 expan-

sion of eligibility for Employment Insurance), and higher minimum wages.

Effective strategies within the school system 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 the fulfillment of a basic human right.

* * *

Bernie Froese-Germain is a Researcher with the Canadian Teachers' Federation in Ottawa and a member of the editorial board of *Our Schools/Our Selves*.

Note: A version of this article appeared in *PD Perspectives (Winter/Spring 2009)* published by the Canadian Teachers' Federation.

REFERENCES

- Bascia, N., & Fredua-Kwarteng, E. (2008). "Reducing class size: Promises and perils." *Education Canada*, 48(5), pp. 30-33.
- Boyd-Zaharias, J., & Pate-Bain, H. (2008, Sept.). "Class matters – In and out of school." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(1), pp. 40-44.
- Campaign 2000 (2008). *Family Security in Insecure Times: The Case for a Poverty Reduction Strategy for Canada*. 2008 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Canada. Toronto.
(<http://www.campaign2000.ca/C2000ReportCardFINALNov10th08.pdf>)
- Canadian Council on Social Development. "Poverty Reduction in Canada: Advancing a National Anti-Poverty and Supports Agenda." Presentation by Katherine Scott at the CACL 50th Anniversary Conference, November 2008.
(http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2007/upp/CACL_Conference-November_08.pdf)

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Cleveland et al. (2006, June). *A Review of the State of the Field of Early Childhood Learning and Development in Child Care, Kindergarten and Family Support Programs*. Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development / OISE-UT. (<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/ccl>)

Donner, A., McCracken, M., & Yalnizyan, A. (2008, Oct. 21). "Economic crisis no excuse to abandon anti-poverty fight." *Toronto Star*. (<http://www.thestar.com/comment/article/520805>)

Flessa, J. (2007). *Poverty and Education: Towards Effective Action. A Review of the Literature*. Toronto: Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. ([http://cus.oise.utoronto.ca/UserFiles/File/Poverty%20lit%20review%20\(J_%20Flessa%20-%2010_2007\).pdf](http://cus.oise.utoronto.ca/UserFiles/File/Poverty%20lit%20review%20(J_%20Flessa%20-%2010_2007).pdf))

Hennessy, T., & Yalnizyan, A. (2008). *Ready for Leadership: Canadians' Perceptions of Poverty*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. (<http://www.growinggap.ca/>)

Lauzière, M. (2008). "Editorial (Focus on Poverty in Canada)." *Perception*, 29(3/4), p. 3.

Levin, B. *Urban Poverty and Canadian Schools – A Research Project* (website). (<http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~blevin/poverty.htm>)

McCaffrey, V. (2008, June). "Full-day kindergarten: A boost for children living in poverty." *ETFO Voice*, 10(5), pp. 14-16.

National Council of Welfare (2007). *Solving Poverty: Four Cornerstones of a Workable National Strategy for Canada*. Vol. #126. Ottawa. (<http://www.ncwcnbes.net/>)

People for Education (2008). *The Annual Report on Ontario's Public Schools 2008*. Toronto. (<http://www.peopleforeducation.com/reportschools08>)

Rothman, L. (2009, Winter/Spring). "Family security in insecure times: Poverty reduction as poverty prevention." *PD Perspectives*, 8(2).

Torjman, S. (2008, Oct.). *Poverty Policy*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy. (<http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/720ENG.pdf>)

UNICEF (2008). *The Child Care Transition. Innocenti Report Card 8*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence. (<http://www.childwellbeing.org.uk/documents/Report-card-8.pdf>)