

Supporting Education...

Building Canada

Child Poverty and Schools



Background Material for Parliamentarians and Staff
CTF Hill Day 2009



Canadian Teachers' Federation
Fédération canadienne des enseignantes et des enseignants

Introduction

The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) speaks for approximately 200,000 teachers in Canada as their national voice on education and related social issues. CTF membership includes teacher organizations across Canada.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation has a long-standing interest in reducing child poverty. In 1989 CTF issued a report which examined the impact of poverty on children, with particular reference to how poor children fare in elementary and secondary schools. Our policy on children and poverty states that: All children, regardless of family income or circumstances, have the right to the full benefits of publicly funded education.

[http://www.ctf-fce.ca/e/programs/pd/children_and_poverty/policy_5_9.asp]

CTF is an active member of various coalitions and networks working to enhance the well-being of Canadian children and youth, including the National Alliance for Children and Youth and Campaign 2000. Among CTF's priorities is to support teachers and teachers' organizations as strong advocates for social justice, with a particular focus on issues related to child poverty.

Child poverty in the Canadian context

Child poverty is a tragic and shameful fact of life in a nation as wealthy as ours. The child poverty rate remains at 1989 levels, the year of the all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. According to Campaign 2000's 2008 report card on child and family poverty, "Canada has enjoyed more than a decade of strong economic growth yet child poverty is essentially the same, based on the latest data available, as it was in 1989 As Canada heads into a period of economic uncertainty, the most strategic decision the federal government could make would be to lower the poverty rate."

The report card paints a bleak national picture, particularly for vulnerable groups such as Aboriginal children, children of new immigrants, and children with disabilities:

- Canada's after-tax child poverty rate appears stalled at 11.3%.
- Nearly one out of every nine Canadian children lives in poverty.
- Child poverty is persistent across Canada. Rates of child and family poverty are at double digits in five out of ten provinces.
A startling 40% of low-income children live in families where at least one of their parents works full-time year round – they're the working poor.
- Children in racialized, new Canadian and Aboriginal families as well as children with disabilities are at greater risk of living in poverty.
- Nearly one out of every two children (49%) living in a family that recently immigrated to Canada (1996-2001) lives in poverty.
- Poverty rates are a formidable barrier in Aboriginal communities. Almost one in two Aboriginal children (49%) under the age of six (not living in First Nations communities) lives in a low-income family.
- Families live deep in poverty. Low-income two parent families, on average, would need an additional \$7,300 per year to reach the poverty line. For lone parent mother-led families, the average depth of poverty is \$6,500.
- In 2007, 720,230 people in Canada used food banks, including 280,900 children. This is an 86% increase since the 1989 unanimous House of Commons' resolution to end child poverty.

Poverty and schools

Child poverty is of course about much more than the statistics. The Canadian Council on Social Development says that “poverty is the stark reality of everyday life for millions of Canadians.”

Given the prevalence of child poverty in Canada, its effects inevitably get played out in schools and classrooms.’

Laurel Rothman (National Coordinator of Campaign 2000) attempts to describe that hard reality through the words of children affected by poverty – she says that:

The impact of poverty goes beyond material deprivation and contributes to social exclusion. As Grade 4 and 5 students in North Bay told us, poverty is:

- “feeling ashamed when my dad can’t get a job.”
- “pretending that you forgot your lunch.”
- “being afraid to tell your Mom you need gym shoes.”
- “not buying books at the book fair.”
- “not getting to go on school trips.”

Rothman emphasizes that:

Teachers and schools are essential and influential partners in improving life chances for low income students. As daily mentors in children’s lives, teachers experience the impact of poverty upon children. Recently teachers in Ontario shared their observations as part of a popular education strategy to mark October 17, the U.N.-designated day for the Elimination of Poverty.

Teachers wrote about:

- students who move and change schools frequently during the school year because the family does not have enough money to pay the rent;
- students who shrink from shame or lash out from anger and who feel the stigma of poverty;
- students who continue to suffer from low self-esteem and low confidence which grows in high school;
- students who sometimes lose hope that life can be any better.

CTF’s 1989 report found that many low-income children experience reduced motivation to learn, delayed cognitive development, lower achievement, less participation in extra-curricular activities, lower career aspirations, interrupted school attendance, lower university attendance, an increased risk of illiteracy, and higher drop-out rates.

The strong correlation between socio-economic status and children’s academic performance is well established. The inequities that exist between affluent and poor families with respect to education were the subject of a Statistics Canada study published in November 2006. In analyzing five-year-old children’s readiness to learn on the basis of gender, level of household income, and a child’s home environment, it concluded that children from lower income families were less ready to learn than children from more affluent households.

The study found important links between readiness to learn and what goes on in a child’s home environment. Specifically, it found that children with high levels of positive parental interaction, children who were read to daily, and a child’s participation in organized sports and general physical activity were all associated with higher scores on various measures of readiness to learn. The study also notes that “the fact that the lower income children were less likely to experience the home environment factor may help to explain the difference in readiness to learn between the income levels.”

A call to action

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

Socio-economic status continues to be the most important single determinant of educational and social outcomes 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, as one characterized by either/or problems with only either/or solutions. The reality is that conditions and influences both inside and outside the schools matter.

A review of the literature on poverty and schooling prepared by Flessa for the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario sums up the challenge we as educators face:

The socially just response to what we know about the relationship between poverty and schooling is not only to work within schools to improve the quality of schooling children receive, but also to work outside of schools to address the poverty that negatively shapes students' learning opportunities to begin with. Schools, in other words, are important, but they cannot do it alone. [emphases added]

As such the paper stresses that

remedies to address the negative relationship between poverty and schooling outcomes must be two-pronged. They must ... include school-based policies (curriculum, staffing, professional development, community connections) as well as broader social and economic policies (housing, healthcare, wages, labour market protection and fairness). One set of reforms without the other will be insufficient.

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”; 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 importance of high quality early childhood education including full-day kindergarten has also proven beneficial for children from poorer families. Vivian McCaffrey 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. Nina Bascia and Eric 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, 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 for all students, and especially disadvantaged children.

School-level strategies to support low-income students should include providing teachers and principals with the ongoing professional development and resources necessary to support the development of effective teaching and learning in Canada's increasingly diverse classrooms.

CTF believes that the effort expended in addressing poverty-related student needs must be recognized in the determination of:

- class size and class composition;
- school resource personnel;
- school budgets.

Federal Government responsibilities

According to Campaign 2000, government programs including the GST credit, the Canada Child Tax Benefit, the Universal Child Care Benefit, and Employment Insurance make a significant difference in reducing Canada's poverty rate for low income families with children – in 2006 child and family poverty would have been 10% higher without public investments.

There is growing momentum to tackle poverty. Opinion polls show that most Canadians believe concrete government action can drastically reduce poverty. In addition several provinces have taken or are planning to take steps to address poverty. Quebec and Newfoundland/Labrador are notable for having implemented poverty reduction strategies.

There are also important lessons to be learned from the international experience in reducing child poverty. Poverty reduction makes sound economic sense as is demonstrated by Denmark, Sweden and Finland, among the most economically competitive nations in the world – these countries have the lowest child poverty rates along with strong social safety nets. Indeed 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.”

Other encouraging developments on the international poverty reduction front include the following:

- 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.
- The UK plans to cut child poverty in half in Britain by 2010, eliminate it by 2020, and create affordable childcare 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 that it has 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 worldwide whose income is less than \$1 a day, and achieve universal primary education for both boys and girls by 2015.

The National Council of Welfare proposes the following four “cornerstones” or elements of a national anti-poverty strategy for Canada:

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.

A recent national poll on perceptions of poverty 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.

The Canadian Teachers’ Federation joins the call for political commitment to a national poverty reduction strategy for Canada. Parents should be able to provide an adequate living standard for their children – working together, governments can ensure that is possible.

Recommendations

- 1. Strategies and policy recommendations that could have a positive impact on inequitable educational opportunities linked to family socio-economic status include:**
 - **political commitment to a national poverty reduction strategy for Canada;**
 - **an increased minimum wage;**
 - **an expansion of eligibility for Employment Insurance;**
 - **a major investment in social housing;**
 - **improved accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education and training;**
 - **the inclusion of child and youth services as part of federal/provincial/territorial agreements concerning immigrants and refugees;**
 - **adequate funding for First Nation’s child welfare agencies to deliver in-home support and prevention services to First Nation’s children and their families.**
- 2. Specific strategies for ensuring all children are better provided for include:**
 - **a universal child care system providing dedicated funding for high quality care and early intervention and school-readiness initiatives for all children;**
 - **restrictions on the growth of for-profit corporate child care;**
 - **support for school boards and relevant community agencies in their attempts to coordinate health, recreation, and social services at school sites.**

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