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Poverty and Education Report

Students are not to blame: Understanding the structural causes of family poverty

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Introduction

In 2006, there were an estimated 181,000 low-income children in the province, with British Columbia reporting the highest before-tax child poverty rate (21.9%) in Canada (15.8%) for the fifth year in a row. This was the news in the *2008 Child Poverty Report Card* recently released by the First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition. Many of these families lived on incomes that were at least \$11,000 below the before-tax low-income threshold (First Call, 2008a). These figures tell us that thousands of BC families are struggling economically, whose children are dealing with the effects of poverty. The current economic recession will further intensify the challenges many families face in earning an income sufficient to support their families.

Part 1 of this paper discusses why it is important for educators to challenge assumptions and beliefs about the structural causes of poverty. How we think, feel, and communicate about poverty makes a difference in how students feel about themselves and their school community. This section also draws on educational research to explore conceptual issues around the framing of poverty and children.

Part 2 of this paper draws on current policy and statistical reports to examine how economic, political, and social changes over the past decade have contributed to child and family poverty. Improving our understanding of the structural determinants of poverty can help to raise awareness of the external factors that undermine the efforts of many families to achieve economic security. The response of the British Columbia government to the issue of child and family poverty is compared to that of other Canadian provinces. This section concludes by describing poverty reduction strategies proposed by social policy advocates. Implications for the public education system are discussed throughout the paper.

Part 1: Challenging assumptions and beliefs about structural causes of poverty

Challenging assumptions and beliefs about structural causes of poverty is essential to creating a sense of safety for low-income children who are dealing with poverty. In 2007, the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto released a research report on homelessness and education (Decter, 2007). The study found that students living in shelters had less of a sense of belonging to their school and tended not to participate in before- and after-school activities. They were reluctant to disclose their living situation for fear of being stigmatized, taunted, or bullied, which was in turn a barrier to receiving subsidies to assist with the cost of extra-curricular programs.

Donna Beegle's (2003) thesis research with university graduates who grew up in severe poverty reveals the extent to which students can internalize the blame for their economic situation. Students reported feeling shame and humiliation at school due to differences in appearance, living in substandard housing conditions, and having minimal food or food that was different from other students. Some tried to remain invisible to avoid negative reactions from others. They also reported feeling that their personal worth was judged by the type of work their parents did and believed that others perceived poverty to be their fault. They believed that their teachers could have done more to protect them from the ridicule of others.

Overcoming barriers to educational success

What helped students overcome significant barriers and complete a university degree? Mentorship was important. Having a trusting relationship with an adult opened the door to sharing feelings and experiences. As a result of sharing, needs were identified. This opened the door to acquiring resources to overcome barriers and support their education (Beegle, 2003).

The study participants also told Dr. Beegle that gaining knowledge and understanding of the structural determinants of poverty helped them to overcome feelings of self-blame:

The participants [...] all felt that understanding root causes of poverty was instrumental in shedding the false burden of responsibility for the social condition of their youth. Yet discussions of the structural causes of poverty rarely occur in the school setting. (p. 17)

Applying the goals of anti-oppressive education, as stated by Kumashiro (2000), helps to articulate why addressing structural causes of poverty is important. He argues that partial or incomplete knowledge is harmful because it perpetuates stereotypes about a marginalized group in the school community and reinforces existing norms, especially if it goes unchallenged by those in authority. Exploring the external or underlying factors that contribute to poverty can help prevent the stigmatization of low-income children by challenging stereotypes and myths about poverty. It can also build empathy by increasing the understanding of external factors

pushing families and individuals into poverty, and can encourage advocates for change on issues related to education and income inequality.

Kumashiro also speaks to the importance of considering how one's position of privilege influences perceptions and behavior toward marginalized groups within the school community. Freiler and Cerny (1998) in their report *Benefiting Canada's Children: Perspectives on Gender and Social Responsibility* cite evidence that reveals the extent to which one's economic situation can shape perceptions of child poverty. They report on a 1997 poll by Ekos Research Associates that found economically secure Canadians tended to view child poverty as being due to internal factors under the parents' control such as lack of self-discipline, selfishness, or lack of parenting skills. In contrast, economically insecure Canadians tended to view child poverty as being due to external factors such as technological change, globalization, and bad luck.

These findings suggest that we all need to evaluate how our sense of economic security influences our perceptions and beliefs about why families are living in poverty. Not doing so may result in educators consciously or unconsciously blaming parents for their low-income situation. This risks students internalizing this negative message.

The language of poverty makes a difference

In communicating about poverty, it is also important to be aware of the subtle meanings contained within labour-market terminology. How we define poverty can reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes. When we talk about poverty, we really mean economic poverty. Yet this is only one of many dimensions to the human experience including intellectual, physical, emotional, social, or spiritual well-being. Obviously these are interrelated and living in economic distress may compromise one's sense of well-being in other areas. But it is also the case that, while one suffers from economic poverty, he or she may have strengths in other domains which those with more material wealth may not.

A slight change in wording can also affect our perceptions and convey subtle messages. For example, "children living with the effects of poverty" does not objectify a child in the way that terms such as "poor children" might. Instead it creates an opening, implying that there is more to a person than their economic circumstances—that economic conditions may be a defining characteristic of a person's experience but they are not all of his or her experience.

Flessa (2007) documents the dominance of a deficit framework approach to poverty and education policy that emphasizes what students are perceived to be lacking. Underlying this approach is an assumption that low-income families and the communities they live in are to blame for poverty and its impact on educational outcomes.

Payne's (2003) framework for understanding poverty has widely influenced poverty education in the United States and to some extent in Canada. This framework has been criticized for using a deficit approach that focuses on "fixing poor people" and for perpetuating harmful stereotypes

about people living in poverty (Gorski, 2008; Sato & Lensmire, 2009). Payne (2009) responds by citing statistics linking poverty to gun violence, imprisonment, and child abuse. But making generalizations about a population based on risk factors is problematic and can easily lead to stereotyping. Just because a specific group is shown to be at higher risk of a behavior does not mean that the vast majority of individuals in that group engage in such a behavior.

Sato and Lensmire (2009) caution that while an increased awareness and communication about students affected by poverty is positive, teachers must challenge misinformation about poverty that reinforces stereotypes. They recommend a pedagogy that emphasizes students' competencies, focuses on teachers' cultural identities, and professional development that supports teacher collaboration.

Language and the framing of child poverty

A 2002 report, *The Framing of Poverty as "Child Poverty" and Its Implications for Women* by Status of Women Canada, cautions that separating the issue of child poverty from poverty in general may have unintended negative consequences. Focusing exclusively on child poverty may reinforce perceptions and beliefs that parents are to blame, that adults who are poor are less deserving of support, and may obscure the effects of regressive social policies on adult poverty. The report advocates an approach that locates child poverty within the broader context of family poverty and gender inequality.

Changes in the terminology to define poverty in social and economic policy reports signals a shift in the framing of this issue. Neutral terms such as low-income children used by Statistics Canada describe an individual or family's economic situation relative to others. Terms such as income security and economic well-being, used in the report *Growing Up in North America: The Economic Well-Being of Children in Canada, the United States, and Mexico* (Canadian Council on Social Development, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, & Red Por Los Derechos de la Infancia en Mexico, 2008) remind us that the ultimate goal of eliminating poverty is to provide a sense of security and well-being to all individuals and families.

So, too, the Living Wage Campaign recently launched in Vancouver and Victoria by First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria implies the right of all individuals and families to a living wage (Richards T., Cohen, Klein, & Littman, 2008). This is a more empowering use of language, shifting the poverty debate from a stance of neutrality or of powerlessness to a proactive concept that engages all parties in a hopeful way in a movement to improve the economic conditions of low-income individuals and families.

Educators may not be able to solve poverty, but they can influence how they and others in the school community respond to students dealing with poverty. By challenging attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate harmful stereotypes about poverty, educators have an opportunity to remove a significant emotional barrier limiting the educational success of low-income students.

Part 2: Understanding the structural causes of family poverty

This section begins by looking at which families experience the highest poverty rates and in which geographic regions families are most vulnerable to poverty. The report then draws upon current policy reports to explore how economic restructuring has impeded the ability of many parents to earn an income sufficient to sustain their families. The extent to which education can help families move out of poverty is discussed, as is the role of government policy. This section ends by reviewing recommendations for reducing family poverty and addressing educational barriers related to poverty.

BC—highest rate of low-income children in Canada

The province where children live is a major factor influencing their risk of living in poverty. Children in British Columbia are more vulnerable to poverty than in any other province in Canada.

On November 21, 2008, the First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition released its *2008 Child Poverty Report Card*. We know from this report that in 2006, there were an estimated 181,000 children in low-income families in the province, with BC reporting the highest before-tax child poverty rate (21.9%) in Canada (15.8%) for the fifth year in a row (First Call, 2008a).

This trend began early in the decade. Between 2001 and 2002, the child poverty rate in BC spiked, widening the gap between BC and Canada significantly. Since 2004, Canada's child poverty rate fell steadily, while BC's fluctuated, with the gap widening again in 2006 (First Call, 2008a).

Many of these families live in severe poverty. In 2006, the average income for low-income families in BC was \$11,000 or more below the low-income threshold (First Call, 2008a). These figures tell us there are thousands of BC families struggling economically, whose children are affected by poverty and may feel marginalized as a result of their economic situation.

Children in some areas of BC are affected by poverty much more than others

Children in some areas of British Columbia are affected much more by poverty than others. Table 1 (page 6) shows municipalities in BC with above- and below-average before-tax child poverty rates, extracted from data published in a news release by First Call: BC Child Youth and Advocacy Coalition (2008b).

Major urban centres have among the highest child poverty rates. Richmond has the highest child poverty rate of all municipalities. Children in rural regions are also vulnerable. Port Alberni has a high before-tax child poverty rate, although the poverty rate falls significantly after taxes and transfers. Both the before-tax and after-tax poverty rate of children in Prince Rupert is well above the average (First Call, 2008b).

Table 1 also shows that child poverty is much less of an issue in some municipalities, even within the same geographic area. For example, the before-tax child poverty rate for Central Saanich (5.1%) is five times lower than for Victoria (26.6%).

While poverty may be less of an issue in affluent districts, low-income students are still vulnerable. Their needs may go unacknowledged and they may experience more stigma and social alienation in a community where vast differences in family incomes exist.

Table 1: Ten highest and lowest child poverty rates in BC municipalities, 2005

(Note: The 2005 before-tax child poverty rate for all of BC=20.9%.)

Municipalities with the highest child poverty rate	2005 Before-tax child poverty rate	Municipalities with the lowest child poverty rate	2005 Before-tax child poverty rate
Richmond	31.4%	Central Saanich	5.1%
Prince Rupert	29.6%	Colwood	6.6%
Burnaby	29.2%	Cold Stream	6.7%
Vancouver	28.7%	Oak Bay	7.9%
Victoria	26.6%	Fort St. John	9.1%
Port Alberni	24.2%	North Saanich	9.6%
Williams Lake and Coquitlam	23.1%	Comox	9.7%
Langley (city)	22.9%	Powell River	10.3%
Vernon	22.7%	Langley (DM)	10.6%
Courtenay	22.6%	Langford	11.0%

BCTF Research table created with Statistics Canada figures cited in First Call: BC Child Youth and Advocacy Coalition (2008b).

Aboriginal families especially vulnerable to poverty

In *Growing Up in North America* (CCSD et al., 2008), the researchers reported that indigenous populations have the highest child poverty rates in Canada, the United States, and Mexico. Aboriginal parents may face many barriers to overcoming poverty including low graduation rates, lack of access to a culturally meaningful education, living in isolated, economically depressed regions of the province, systemic discrimination, and overcoming past and present oppressive conditions.

Statistics Canada recently published its 2006 *Aboriginal Children's Survey* (O'Donnell, 2008) which shows high poverty rates among young Aboriginal children in Canada. Almost half (49%) of off-reserve Aboriginal children and 31% of Métis children under six years of age were in low-income families in 2006, compared to 18% of non-Aboriginal children.

The survey (O'Donnell, 2008) also found that about half of off-reserve Aboriginal and 60% of Métis children had parents who rated their schools, nursery schools, and early childhood programs as "excellent" or "very good." In contrast, only 17% of off-reserve Aboriginal children and 16% of Métis children had parents who rated access to Aboriginal cultural activities as "excellent" or "very good." These figures suggest that additional educational resources are required to support the substantial numbers of Aboriginal children in the early grades who are

dealing with both the effects of poverty and the lack of access to a culturally meaningful education.

Families newly immigrated to Canada, or a member of a visible minority, at risk

Families with children who are newly immigrated to Canada are more vulnerable to poverty. Children living in a family where the main income recipient recently immigrated to Canada comprised 26.1% of low-income children in 2004, up from 22.6% in 1989 (Fleury, 2008). The Canadian Council on Social Development et al. (2008) reported that poverty among immigrant families is increasingly concentrated in Canada's large urban areas, with 34% of visible minority children living in poverty in 2000.

Milton (2008) in her article on race, class, and academic achievement suggests that being both a visible minority and poor has resulted in "de facto school segregation based on income" (p. 18). She attributes this to social housing and urban planning policies that create neighbourhoods of dense poverty, citing Toronto as an example. Black students make up 12% of the total student population in Toronto with 60-70% concentrated in just a few schools because their families are more likely to be poor.

Family structure—the breadwinner model a thing of the past

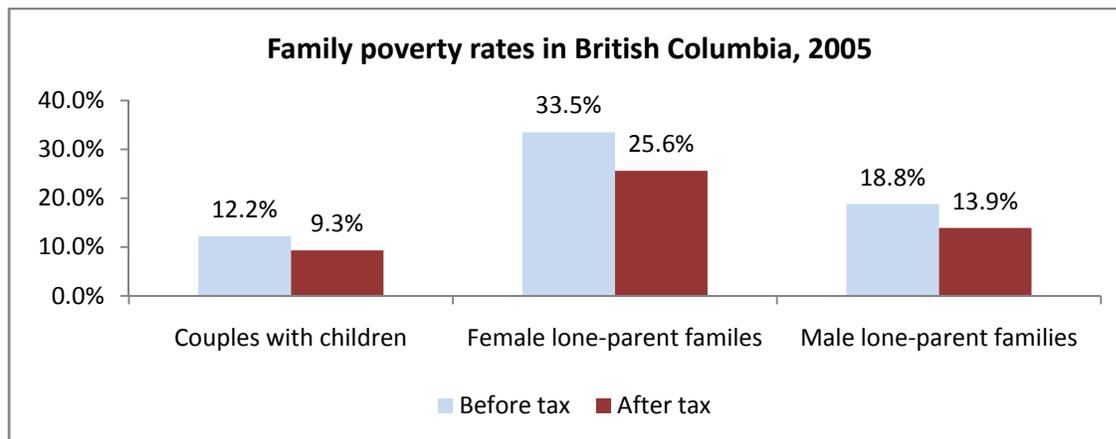
Families have undergone considerable changes in the past two decades. Lone-parent families are more prevalent as are blended families. Whether in a one- or two-parent family, mothers with young children are more likely to be working in paid employment than in previous decades. To fully understand how family structure influences poverty, it is important to consider both risk (the percentage of families living in poverty) and the number of families affected.

Lone parent families have highest poverty rates

As Chart 1 (page 8) indicates, 2005 figures for BC reveal that female lone-parent families have the highest risk of poverty with a before-tax family poverty rate of 33.5% compared to 12.2% for couples with children. The before-tax female lone-parent family poverty rates are high across the province, the highest being in Prince Rupert (46%) and Terrace (47.2%). Only two census areas recorded a female lone-parent family poverty rate below 20%—Fort St. John (18.9%) and Salmon Arm (18.7%) (First Call, 2008c).

Children in female lone-parent families are a much higher risk of poverty than two-parent families. In 2006, the before-tax child poverty rate for children in BC living in female lone-parent families was 50.3% compared to 16.3% of children in two-parent families (First Call, 2008a).

Chart 1: Family poverty rates in British Columbia by family type, 2005



BCTF Research table created with Census figures cited in First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition (2008c).

A number of structural factors may contribute to this high poverty rate.

A lack of affordable, quality childcare is particularly an issue for lone-parent families. Even where childcare is available, a lone parent's employment opportunities will likely be restricted to day-time jobs with a Monday to Friday schedule. This shrinks the pool of available jobs considerably.

Gender discrimination in earnings and hiring practices may also be at play as the before-tax family poverty rate in 2005 for male lone-parent households was 18.8%, considerably lower than female lone-parent families (33.5%) in British Columbia (First Call, 2008c).

According to 2008 Statistics Canada data, a gender gap persists, with women earning about 84 cents for each dollar earned by their male counterparts in 2007 (Statistics Canada, 2008). Women still tend to be concentrated in sales, service, and non-professional office jobs in the private sector which tend to be precarious, low-paying, and non-unionized (Jackson, 2004).

Regressive welfare reform introduced in British Columbia placed limitations on parents with young children who receive social assistance benefits. These families are particularly vulnerable to living in severe poverty. In BC, a lone-parent family with one child under six years receiving social assistance in 2008, lived \$11,370 below the before-tax poverty line (First Call, 2008a).

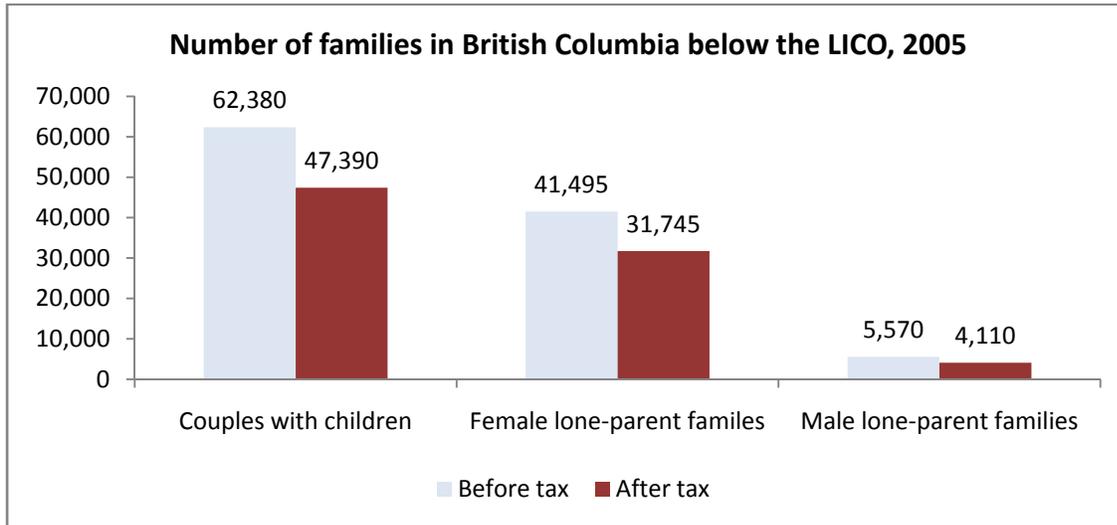
Child poverty has worsened in part due to benefits being eroded by inflation. A 2008 National Welfare Council report shows that between 1998 and 2007, inflation-adjusted annual income assistance benefits in BC fell by \$449 for a lone parent with one child and by \$1,474 for a couple with two children.

More two-parent families with children are affected by poverty

While lone-parent families are at a much higher risk of poverty, the absolute number of children affected by poverty is higher for two-parent families because they comprise the majority of

families. In 2005, there were 62,380 couples with children in BC living below the before-tax low income cutoff and 41,495 female lone-parent families (First Call, 2008c). Both absolute numbers and percentages need to be considered in funding education and poverty programs. Otherwise, the needs of a substantial number of children may go unaddressed.

Chart 2: Number of BC families below the before-tax low-income cut off (LICO), 2005



BCTF Research table created with Census figures cited in First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition (2008c).

The poverty rate for children in two-parent families in BC almost doubled between 1989 and 2006 (First Call, 2008a). Many of these children may have one or both parents working in paid employment. Families in BC with one or more earners are more vulnerable to poverty than Canada as a whole. In 2006, the poverty rate in BC among children in families with full-time, full-year employment was the highest in the country—10.1% compared to 7.3% for Canada (First Call, 2008a).

The family poverty rate of couples with children is much higher in the Vancouver census metropolitan area (16.3%) than the rest of the province (12.2%). Three-quarters of couples with children in BC with incomes below the before-tax poverty line live in the Vancouver metropolitan area compared to just over half of all lone-parent families (First Call, 2008c).

Educators need to be aware of the unique barriers that lone parents may face in sustaining their families economically, while avoiding stereotypes that may stigmatize students. These statistics also suggest that educators be “attuned” to the “silence of poverty” and not overlook students in two-parent families whose needs may go unrecognized.

Economic restructuring eroded family income

The report *Growing Up in North America* documents the erosion of real wages in Canada over the past 15 years, with families maintaining their income due to increased hours of work by

family members, mainly women. The authors note that economic growth has not necessarily translated into economic security for families:

Low wages result in low family incomes and high levels of economic insecurity, despite high levels of employment and rising rates of female participation. (CCSD et al., 2008, p. 27)

Fleury (2008) also concluded that while the increased work hours of family members provided a buffer against poverty, that employment of one or both parents is no guarantee of income security:

However, even parents' substantial work effort does not always protect children from low income if salary and working hours are insufficient. (p. 22)

These studies provide an overview of which families are most likely to experience the effects of poverty, and indicate the growing vulnerability of families in an economy that requires two income earners to attain a standard of living that used to be possible with one income earner.

The fewer the earners the higher the risk of poverty

Labour market participation by one or more parents clearly has a significant impact on the economic well-being of families. Fleury's (2008) study that shows Canadian children who are in families with no wage earner are the most vulnerable to living in a low-income situation (71%), and families with one earner (23%) or two earners (5%) are the least vulnerable.

There are many reasons a parent may be unable to work including having a disability or other medical condition, language barriers, or having young children with no access to affordable, quality childcare. Parents who face systemic barriers such as employment discrimination are doubly vulnerable. Lack of access to affordable housing or adequate transportation also may prevent families from moving to areas where employment opportunities are available.

Economic restructuring increases income inequality among families

The *Growing Up in North America* (CCSD et al., 2008) report identifies the growing income inequality between high- and low-income families with children as a significant factor affecting the well-being of children in the United States and Canada. Fleury's (2008) in-depth analysis of low-income families in Canada also reported growing income inequality over the past decade. She notes that the average income of \$21,400 for low-income families with children in 2004 was about 3.4 times lower than the average income of \$72,800 for non low-income families.

This disparity is particularly evident in BC. In 2006, the average family income of the wealthiest 10% of families with children was \$201,490. This represented an increase of \$47,591 since 1989, after adjusting for inflation. In contrast, the average family income for the 10% of families in the lowest income group was \$15,657, a decrease of \$1,309 since 1989 (First Call, 2008a). This

means that the *increase* in income between 1989 and 2006 for the wealthiest families was three times greater than the *total* income the poorest 10% of families lived on for all of 2006.

Growing income inequality among families has many educational implications. First, low-income students who attend schools in communities where these vast income disparities exist may feel especially marginalized. Second, many researchers have documented the adverse impact of socioeconomic factors on educational outcomes (Brownell, Roos, & Fransoo et al., 2006; Levin & Riffel, 2000)—these are likely to intensify with the growing income inequality between the wealthiest and poorest of families. Third, families in affluent communities are better able to raise school funds from other sources to compensate for shortfalls in education funding. Affluent communities are also most likely to actively recruit and attract international students, bringing millions of dollars in tuition fees into the district. Schools in areas most affected by poverty, with large numbers of vulnerable students, may be the most in need and the least able to protect the quality of education arising from inadequate funding.

Growth of precarious employment leaves families vulnerable to poverty

The struggle for families with children to earn a living wage needs to be located in the context of economic restructuring within North America and globally. The report *Growing Up in North America* (CCSD et al., 2008) points to global restructuring and economic integration in North America as forces shaping the economic well-being of families. These market changes have resulted in a polarized labour market characterized by a growing pool of precarious low-wage employment in the sales and service sector and higher wage jobs in the knowledge economy, requiring technical and professional training.

The Fleury study (2008) revealed that the working conditions of low-income families with children were “less favourable than other workers” and that they tended to work 500 fewer hours, have atypical work schedules, earn less than \$10 per hour, be non-unionized, and be without benefits.

Uma Rani (2008), in a report that examines the impact of changing work patterns on income inequality, documents the expansion of part-time and temporary employment in advanced economies over the past fifteen years. Women are disproportionately located in part-time jobs, often to balance work and family responsibilities. The report notes that countries with supportive childcare policies and individual taxation saw a significant reduction in the incidence of part-time employment.

Temporary employment also increased across all age categories, with a higher share of these jobs held by women. Rani cites a number of factors underlying this shift, including increased competitiveness in product markets and the fragmentation and outsourcing of work due to technological change. Canada is listed as having the sixth highest incidence of temporary employment (about 12%) in 2006, out of 24 advanced economies (Rani, 2008).

According to MacPhail and Bowles (2009), the risk of working in temporary employment has increased more in BC than the rest of Canada. Their survey of casual workers in Vancouver and Prince George found that 80% do not choose temporary employment and are seeking permanent work.

Small business is often touted as the engine of the economy, yet Fleury (2008) found low-income children were more likely to live in situational poverty if a parent was self-employed. According to Statistics Canada, in 2005, average earnings from self-employment were \$12,000 for women and \$20,080 for men (2008).

Economic restructuring and market forces may also be making it increasingly difficult for new immigrants to move from an unstable to a stable employment situation after arriving in Canada. Statistics Canada (Ostrovsky, 2008) concluded that, based on earnings in the first four years after landing in Canada, earnings instability of immigrants who came to Canada between 1998 and 2000 was substantially higher than those who came to Canada in the early to mid 1980s. The study also found that earnings inequality increased over the last two decades among those newly immigrated to Canada.

Regressive government policy fosters expansion of low-wage employment

The British Columbia government introduced regressive labour market policies which act to reinforce the expansion of the low-wage sector of the economy. Not only did the government resist calls by anti-poverty advocates to raise the minimum wage, they implemented a \$6 per hour training wage. The BC government also weakened labour-standard provisions for non-unionized workers which only served to foster the expansion of the low-wage sector and undermine the rights of these workers. MacPhail and Bowles (2009) raise this point in reporting on their research on casual employment in British Columbia.

The BC government also enacted legislation to replace unionized hospital service jobs that provided a living wage and benefits with low-wage jobs in the private sector. This was a significant setback for women workers, in particular. According to the Canadian Labour Congress (Jackson, 2004), unions have been instrumental in improving wages and working conditions for women in Canada. In 2003, union women earned 37% more per hour than non-union women. This reduced the gender-earnings gap with union women earning 90.6% as much as union men compared to 77.8% for non-union women and men. Union women also had a significantly lower incidence of involuntary job loss than non-union women in 2000. A new U.S. study by the Centre for Economic and Policy Research (Schmitt, 2008) reported that union membership improved wages and benefits for women, by as much as one additional year of education.

Lack of affordable housing contributes to family poverty

The report *Growing Up in North America* (CCSD et al., 2008) also identifies the escalation of housing prices in the United States and Canada as resulting in rising shelter costs and poor housing conditions for low-income families. By 2000, about two-thirds (69.3%) of low-income families with children lived in unaffordable housing compared to 21.4% of all families in Canada (CCSD et al., 2008).

Barbara Ehrenreich (2001), in her book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* argues that poverty persists in part because while “rents are exquisitely sensitive to market forces, wages clearly are not” (p. 201). Based on her experience working in minimum-wage jobs, she concludes:

So the problem goes beyond my personal failures and miscalculations. Something is wrong, very wrong, when a single person in good health, a person who in addition possesses a working car, can barely support herself by the sweat of her brow. You don't need a degree in economics to know that wages are too low and rents are too high. (p. 199)

Education makes a difference

There is considerable evidence that education buffers families against poverty. Fleury (2008) found that the education level of a parent protected children from persistent poverty but not short-term poverty, indicating that education can help families to move out of poverty in the longer-term. Data published in the *Growing Up in North America* report (CCSD et al., 2008) shows that the child poverty rate in 2000 was five times higher for parents with less than a secondary education (27.6%) compared to parents who completed a university or college education (5.4%), and twice as high as families where a parent completed secondary/vocational or some post-secondary education.

Overall, education results in higher-than-average earnings. In 2007, employees with a Master's or Doctoral degree earned an average of \$30.44 per hour, 75% more than employees with just a high school diploma. Since 1997, the hourly wage in constant 2007 dollars declined for workers with no high school diploma, and increased by 5% for those with a post-secondary certificate. Wages stayed about the same for employees with a Master's or Doctoral degree (Statistics Canada, 2008).

While a gender gap in wages persists, it narrows with each level of education. In 2007, women with a bachelor's degree earned 85 cents for every dollar earned by men, while women with Grade 8 or less earned 72 cents for every dollar earned by men (Statistics Canada, 2008).

Aboriginal employment and education

Completing a secondary education certificate almost doubles the employment rate for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals (Richards, Hove, & Afolabi, 2008). Overall, graduation rates are

much lower for Aboriginal students, especially for those living on-reserve (Richards, 2008). The low graduation rate limits the employment opportunities of thousands of Aboriginal adults in BC, making them especially vulnerable to poverty. The employment rate for Aboriginal people who completed a university degree in 2006 was slightly higher than for non-Aboriginal people (Richards et al., 2008). These findings suggest that a comprehensive plan to address the barriers Aboriginal students face in completing their education is essential to reducing persistent high levels of child poverty.

Education is a buffer against poverty but no guarantee

The authors of *Growing Up in North America* (CCSD et al., 2008) conclude that a lack of post-secondary education poses a significant barrier to moving between the low-wage labour market and the higher-paid jobs associated with the knowledge economy.

An exception to this trend is the high paying jobs in the primary resource sector, such as oil and gas extraction. A 2008 Statistics Canada report on Canadian wages revealed that about 12% of employees earning \$20 – \$29 per hour had less than a Grade 8 education. Recently, the Alberta government appealed to employers in the oil and gas industry not to hire young people who discontinued their secondary education to take high-paying jobs in northern Alberta.

Of more concern is that nearly 1 out of 7 Canadian workers with a university degree, aged 25 to 64 years earned less than \$12 per hour in 2007 (Statistics Canada, 2008). The 2008 report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Education at a Glance*, shows Canada having the highest proportion (18%) of highly educated individuals aged 25 to 64 years earning less than half the median wage—the worst record of 27 OECD countries.

Uma Rani (2008), of the International Institute for Labour Studies, cautions that the restructuring of labour markets in Western economies means that the quality, higher salaried, and more stable forms of employment are being reserved for a smaller pool of well-educated workers while the pool of low quality, insecure jobs are growing. Unless there is a trend away from this polarization, education in and of itself may not be enough for individuals and families to move out of poverty.

What did Canada do to mitigate the effects of economic restructuring on family income?

On November 25, 2008, the Canadian Council on Social Development presented an overview of poverty reduction initiatives in Canada, concluding that the direct effect of the tax/transfer system on rates of low income and depth of poverty has remained unchanged since 1989. In other words, government policy initiatives to address poverty have not been sufficient to mitigate the effects of market restructuring on income levels.

The report *Growing Up in North America* (CCSD et al., 2008) noted that government spending as a percentage of GDP fell from 18.8% to 16.7% between 1990 and 2000. The researchers

identify three trends in Canadian government expenditures that affected family incomes—reduced social spending, reduced transfers to the provinces, and the introduction of more narrowly targeted programs. They note that the proportion of children in receipt of transfers has fallen as Canada moved to more narrowly targeted income-support programs.

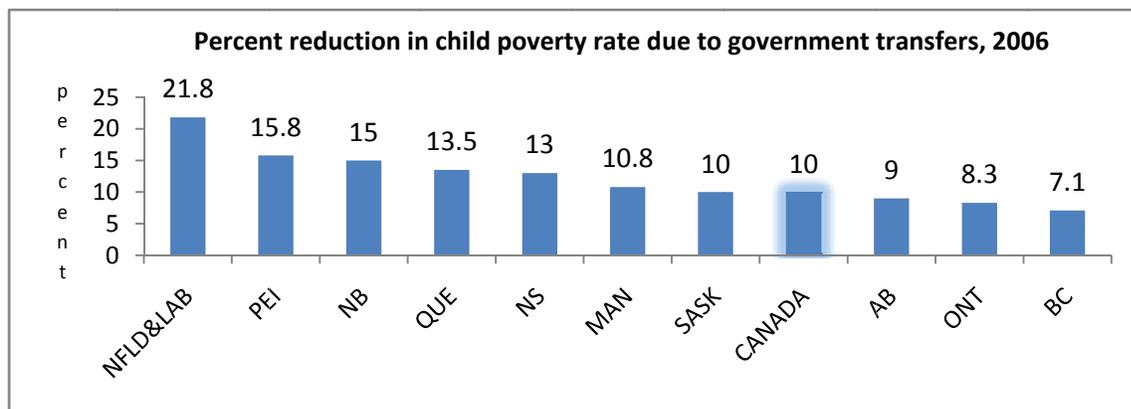
Fleury (2008) concludes that the effect of taxes and transfer payments targeted to children reduced the rate of low-income children in Canada by 8% to 9% each year since 1994. However, these policies did less to help families living in severe low income situations than ten years previously.

Other provinces have acted

Perhaps most disturbing is how poorly BC fares in its efforts to reduce child poverty compared to other provinces. In its *2008 Report Card on Child Poverty, First Call* (2008a) published data to show how much higher the child poverty rate in each province would be without the taxes and transfers that are currently in place to improve income levels for families with children. Chart 6 (below) shows the amount by which each province reduced the child poverty rate in 2006. This provides a measure of the relative progress provincial governments have made in reducing child poverty.

Government transfers in BC reduced the market child poverty rate by only 7.1% in 2006, the lowest in the country. Chart 3 shows that several provinces have made remarkable progress in reducing child poverty rates with government transfers. Most notable are Newfoundland and Labrador (-21.8%), New Brunswick (-15.0%), Prince Edward Island (-15.8%), and Québec (-13.5%).

Chart 3: Percent reduction in child poverty rate due to government transfers, 2006



BCTF Research chart and calculations created with data cited in *First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition* (2008a).

Québec chose a different approach, implementing a comprehensive framework of “family-friendly” policies to address the underlying causes of family poverty. This approach seeks to reduce family poverty while supporting families to balance work and family responsibilities. To achieve this goal, Québec provided parents with universal access to affordable childcare,

expanded maternity and parental leave programs, and consolidated and increased income supports/benefits for one- and two-parent families. Working parents are also eligible for up to ten days leave per year for childcare (Krull, 2007).

Using a Market Basket Measure, which is most sensitive to provincial differences, the probability of a child being low-income in Québec in 2004 was 8% compared to 23% for a child in British Columbia (Fleury, 2008). The Québec example shows the rest of Canada that it is within our means, and a reasonable expectation, to make significant progress in improving the economic well-being of the families living in poverty.

Strong economic growth accompanied by budget surpluses has not resulted in a meaningful reduction in child poverty. Inflation-adjusted GDP in BC (November to November) grew by 4.4% in 2005 and 2006 (BC Ministry of Finance, 2008). In spite of this, British Columbia continued to record the highest child poverty rate in Canada. Between 2005 and 2006, the before-tax child poverty rate in BC increased from 20.9% to 21.9%, resulting in 7,000 more children living in poverty than the previous year. (First Call, 2007 and 2008a).

Meanwhile, several provinces less prosperous than British Columbia made significant progress in reducing child poverty rates. British Columbia has the resources to make a difference. What is lacking is the vision and political will to implement a poverty-reduction strategy to improve the economic well-being of over 180,000 children.

Educational vulnerability increases

The effects of these policies will be felt in the British Columbia school system for years to come. Recent research suggests that the vulnerability of young children increased during a period of sustained high child poverty rates in British Columbia.

The Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) assesses the vulnerability of Kindergarten students on a number of indicators, using the Early Development Instrument. This instrument measures several dimensions of early childhood development including physical, social, and emotional well-being; cognitive/language skills; and communication skills/general knowledge (Hertzman and Irwin, 2007). HELP (2007) reported on a comparison of two periods in which these measures were taken—2001 to 2004 and 2004 to 2007. This comparison shows the Neighbourhood Vulnerability on one or more scales increased in 26 school districts and decreased in 7 districts between the two periods of data collection.

It is long past time for the provincial government to heed the call to develop and implement a poverty reduction strategy, following the lead of more progressive provinces in Canada. According to a poll commissioned by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in October 2008 by Environics, 87% of British Columbians say the Prime Minister and premiers need to set concrete targets and timelines to reduce poverty and measure their progress (Klein et al., 2008).

Pro-active solutions to improving the economic well-being of families

The report *Growing Up in North America* (CCSD et al., 2008) recommends that a comprehensive poverty-reduction strategy include a mix of social and labour policies to provide income supports to alleviate and prevent child and family poverty, adjustment assistance programs to families affected by economic dislocation, and access to affordable housing and quality childcare. Reform of labour market policy is also needed to encourage the growth of better quality jobs as well as policies to improve access to education and health services.

Rothman and Noble (2008), researchers with Campaign 2000—a non-partisan, cross-Canada coalition of over 120 national, provincial, and community organizations—calculate that an increase of maximum National Child Benefit from \$3,271 to \$5,100 per child is necessary to achieve a significant poverty reduction. Campaign 2000 also recommends that the Canadian government expand eligibility for Employment Insurance, increase federal work tax credits to \$2,400 per year, implement a national housing plan with substantial funding for social housing, provide affordable and accessible early childhood education and care, develop an equity plan to address barriers to achieving equal opportunity for all children, and implement a specific poverty reduction strategy for Aboriginal families.

In December 2008, the BC Office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives released the report *A Poverty Reduction Plan for BC* (Klein et al., 2008). Recommendations include improved access and levels of income support for non-employed individuals, improvements to the minimum wage and restoration of employment standards protection, focusing efforts on groups most vulnerable to poverty, immediate expansion of affordable housing, universally funded childcare, an increase in funding for post-secondary training for low-income individuals, and an expansion of home-care support and residential-care services. The report suggests concrete targets and timelines for implementing each of these recommendations.

The Living Wage Campaign recently launched in Vancouver and Victoria by First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria, drawing on the success of such a campaign in London, England holds much promise (T. Richards et al., 2008). To be successful, this campaign will need a government that can engage employers to take more responsibility for improving the economic security of families, and introduce social and labour policy supportive of families with children, such as those implemented in Québec.

Well-funded education plan is needed

Finally, an essential component of a poverty reduction strategy is to develop a well-funded education plan for how best to support all students, including the growing number of vulnerable children entering the British Columbia school system.

Hertzman and Irwin of the Human Early Learning Partnership (2007) recommend universal access to programs to address the early learning needs of vulnerable children in British

Columbia, based on their assessment of early child development of Kindergarten students in BC. They concluded that:

While the highest risk of vulnerability is found in the poorest neighbourhoods, the largest number of children with developmental vulnerabilities is spread across middle-class neighbourhoods. (p. 4)

Levin and Riffel's (2000) research suggests that with the exception of some urban areas, few school districts have advocacy groups to effectively lobby on issues related to poverty and education. Without this political pressure, school districts and provincial governments have not made poverty a priority issue, either because policy-makers do not perceive it as their problem, or do not believe they can do anything about it. In an era of funding cutbacks, urban schools have increasingly had to defend funding for inner-city programs.

Levin and Riffel argue that while educators cannot solve poverty, there is much that can be done to support students. Potential solutions include whole school instructional approaches, schools working closely with parents and the broader community (e.g. community liaison workers), clothing and nutritional programs, the elimination of school fees, early learning programs, and community and economic development.

Brownell et al. (2006) make a number of recommendations arising from their population-based research in Manitoba on socioeconomic status and educational outcomes. They recommend a social program design be universal with a need-based focus and include early childhood programs, quality childcare, parenting programs, early school years intervention programs, as well as programs to address the gender gap and to prevent withdrawal from secondary education.

Flessa's (2007) comprehensive literature review on poverty and education for the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario evaluates existing responses and potential solutions to address poverty and education concerns. He cautions that while schools support the concept of school-community connections, "difficulty arises in moving from generic interest to concrete policies and practices that make real connections between schools and homes" (p. 26). This is in part due to an unacknowledged difference in expectations, values, and socioeconomic position between predominantly middle class institutions and the community with which they are seeking to make connections. He argues that the deficit framework that has historically defined educational policy creates an adversarial relationship between school and community, and needs to be challenged for meaningful progress to take place.

Summary

Research shows that BC has the highest child and family poverty rates in the country. Poverty affects students in both rural and urban areas. Educators across the province are increasingly challenged to help students overcome educational barriers related to poverty. This report encourages educators to challenge assumptions and beliefs about causes of poverty. Doing so can

build empathy and understanding, and prevent low-income students from internalizing the negative message that they are to blame for their economic circumstances.

The paper provides an in-depth look at structural factors which individuals lack control over that contribute to increasing family poverty rates. The erosion of family income over the past decade makes it difficult for families to survive on one income, yet maternity and childcare benefits in BC and Canada lag well behind European countries. Rapidly rising housing costs are a significant factor driving poverty rates in BC. So, too, is the expansion of low-paying, insecure employment that results in some parents working at two or more jobs to make ends meet. Education can buffer family poverty, yet the rising cost of post-secondary education prevents many families from gaining the skills necessary to move out of low-wage employment. Governments have not done enough to foster the expansion of quality jobs that provide a living wage. Minimum wage and other income supports for low-income families have not risen in proportion to the cost of living.

These are all structural causes of poverty. While they may not be under the control of an individual, all of these factors can be addressed through social and economic policy. Scandinavian countries have shown that economic productivity, family-friendly policies, and poverty reduction can successfully coexist. Some provinces in Canada have taken the lead, especially Québec, with promising results. If the British Columbia government is committed to having “the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent” (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 15), policy-makers can start by taking action to end family poverty, thereby removing a significant barrier to educational success.

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