

# Educational Responses to Poverty\*

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Poverty is an important negative influence on educational attainment in Canada and a key barrier to educational improvement. Although this is widely recognized by educators, schools have not invested significant resources in dealing with poverty effectively. Schools cannot by themselves solve problems of poverty, nor should they be held responsible for them. At the same time, a considerable body of research indicates that schools can contribute in important ways to alleviating poverty's effects. Important strategies for doing so include improved instruction, more preschool education, and stronger links with families and communities. Change in these areas is feasible, though not easy.

La pauvreté exerce une influence négative importante sur la réussite scolaire au Canada et constitue une barrière de taille pour l'amélioration de l'éducation. Bien que son impact soit largement reconnu par les enseignants, les écoles n'investissent pas beaucoup de ressources pour faire face à la pauvreté avec efficacité. Les écoles ne sont pas en mesure de régler toutes seules les problèmes de la pauvreté, et ne devraient pas être tenues responsables de ces problèmes. Parallèlement, de nombreux travaux de recherche indiquent que les écoles peuvent contribuer de façon importante à atténuer les effets de la pauvreté. Au nombre des stratégies clés en ce sens figurent l'amélioration de la scolarité, une plus grande diffusion de l'éducation préscolaire et l'établissement de liens plus solides avec les familles et les communautés. Des changements dans ces domaines sont possible, même s'ils ne sont faciles à effectuer.

## INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF POVERTY

In this article I urge a stronger and more focused educational response to poverty. Concern for improving education is high in Canada, although people disagree about what improvements are needed and how to bring them about. Poverty has such an enormous negative influence, however, that it must be part of the education reform agenda whether justified on grounds of economic interest or of social justice.

Schools are not primarily responsible for poverty's existence, nor can they eliminate it; other economic and social structures and policies are much more

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influential in both regards. There is a danger that schools will be blamed for problems not of their making, just as there is a danger that schools will blame parents and children. We can usefully focus on things that can be done in schools even knowing full well that schools are only one part of the struggle for a more humane world.

#### THE NEGATIVE EFFECT OF POVERTY

The deleterious effect of poverty on education has been well known for centuries. Thirty years of careful social science has provided overwhelming evidence that socioeconomic status (SES) has been and continues to be the best single predictor of how much schooling students will obtain, how well they will do at their studies, and what their life prospects beyond school are. Much Canadian research confirms poverty's negative influence on students' behaviour, achievement, and retention in school (see Levin, 1994b).

None of this research says poverty is fatal to educational success. There are always some children who, despite highly unfavourable life circumstances, manage to succeed. An interesting body of research is developing around these so-called "resilient" children, studying the elements in their situation that may be linked to improved chances of success (Reynolds, 1993). It would be a terrible mistake to conclude that growing up in poverty is an irrevocable blow to one's future, since that would mean giving up on efforts to work with poor families and their children.

At the same time, there can be no doubt that poverty puts children at a tremendous disadvantage.

Individuals who are poor . . . are confronted with an unremitting succession of negative life events (eviction, physical illness, criminal assault) in the context of chronically stressful, ongoing life conditions such as inadequate housing and dangerous neighbourhoods which, together, markedly increase the exigencies of day-to-day existence. (McLoyd & Wilson, 1990, pp. 49–50)

#### WHO IS POOR IN CANADA?

Although we speak of "child poverty," the poverty of children is almost always a product of the poverty of the adults who look after them. We might better use the term "children living in poor families" to put the appropriate stress on the family unit rather than the child alone.

The most common poverty indicator in Canada is the low-income cut-off (LICO) used by Statistics Canada. Although relatively arbitrary in its origins, the indicator has broad acceptability and allows historical comparisons. To give an example, the low-income cut-off for a family of four in a large Canadian city in 1993 was about \$30,800; for a single parent with one child in a rural area the cut-off was \$14,300 (National Council of Welfare, 1993, p. 25).

Using the LICO definitions, the overall poverty rate in Canada in 1991 was 16%; that is, 4.2 million people fell below the 1991 low-income thresholds. For children under 18, the rate was 18.3%, involving 1,210,000 children (National Council of Welfare, 1993, pp. 3, 4). Most poor families fell well below the LICO levels; for example, in 1991 poor couples with children earned on average less than 70% of the cut-off (or about \$21,000 for a family of four in a large city). Single-parent mothers earned less than 60% of the cut-off (National Council of Welfare, 1993). The average Canadian family with children under 19 had an income of just under \$60,000 in 1991, whereas the average poor family had an income of about \$18,600, or 32% of the average (National Council of Welfare, 1993, p. 16). In addition, about half again as many people live only slightly above the poverty line, and can be considered vulnerable to poverty (Barnhorst & Johnson, 1991, p. 22).

Poverty rates fluctuate over time, falling during better economic times and rising during recessions. The poverty rate for the general population and for children fell significantly through the 1960s and 1970s, rose from 1980 until 1984, fell through 1989, then climbed again. Child poverty rates in Canada, however, have not fallen below 14% even during the best years of the 1980s (National Council of Welfare, 1992).

Child poverty is not evenly distributed across Canada. Rates vary significantly, from 27% in Manitoba to 14.5% in British Columbia and Prince Edward Island. In all provinces more than 50% of single-parent mothers live in poverty, and the national rate for this group is 66% (National Council of Welfare, 1993, p. 20). Estimates of poverty rates among aboriginal people, including children, are three times the national rate, or as high as 50% (Canada, Standing Committee, 1991).

The most notable change in the poor population in recent years has been the drop in the number of poor seniors, and the concomitant increase in the proportion of poor families and especially women and children. For many people near or below the poverty line, government transfers such as pensions, social assistance, and unemployment insurance are a major source of income. The Economic Council of Canada (1992) described Canada's recent history as "expansion of income transfers [offsetting] the growing inequality in labour incomes," and noted that poverty rates through most of the 1970s and 1980s would have been twice as high if one considered only labour market earnings (p. 7). The Council described Canada's income redistribution efforts as "modest" (p. 9).

Poverty rates have remained relatively high in Canada despite enormous growth in the proportion of two-income families. Much increased labour force participation by women has not reduced the number of poor families very much (Economic Council of Canada, 1992), although the National Council of Welfare estimates that more than twice as many families would be classified as poor if they did not have two incomes (National Council of Welfare 1993, p. 23).

The largest group of the poor is families with one or both parents working whose income is simply insufficient. Rising average levels of unemployment,

falling real wages, and the significant decrease in secure, middle-income jobs such as those in manufacturing have made it more difficult for Canadian families to support themselves no matter how hard they try. There is an increasing proportion of part-time, short-term, no-benefit jobs in Canada (Economic Council of Canada, 1992, p. 30). As well, minimum wage rates in Canada have fallen steadily in real terms over the past decade. In 1975 two wage earners at minimum wage would have earned enough income to put them about 10% above the poverty line. By 1985 the same couple would have been more than 15% below the poverty line (Gunderson, Muszynski, & Keck, 1990).

A second significant source of poverty for children is marriage breakdown—separation or divorce. The economic implications of separation or divorce are serious and very negative for women (Gunderson, Muszynski, & Keck, 1990). The Economic Council of Canada estimated that divorce resulted in an average 40% decrease in annual income for women, and that the decrease remained severe for several years, whereas male incomes increased in the year after divorce. Low or no child support payments were identified as a major source of this problem (Economic Council of Canada, 1992, p. 49).

Social assistance rates across Canada are too low to lift recipients out of poverty. Moreover, almost half of the working poor receive no benefits from unemployment insurance or social assistance (Economic Council of Council, 1992, p. 37). Government payments to the poor do reduce the impact of poverty, though many of these payments—for example, 80% of unemployment insurance payouts—go to families or individuals who are not poor. Compared with other industrialized countries, Canada spends a relatively small proportion of its wealth on income support for the poor (Economic Council of Canada, 1992).

The Social Planning Council of Winnipeg (1992) provided a clear and concise summary:

In sum, the majority of poor children are living in two-parent families with a head who has less than high school education but has been employed full time for the year. The risk of being poor, however, is greatest for a child six years old or younger who is supported by a single mother with less than a high school education working part time or not at all (p. 13)

#### *A Digression on Single Parents*

Many educators see single-parent families as linked to problems in children's schooling. This spotlight on single parents, the great majority of whom are women, may blame the victim instead of concentrating attention on more important causal variables. Without undertaking a full discussion of this issue (see Hudson & Galaway, 1993), three important points can be made.

First, as noted, most female single parents (who constitute 90% of all single parents living with children) are poor, and the breakdown of marriage is a major

cause of their poverty. It seems likely that public policies providing better support to women after marriage breakdown—for example improved child care and better child support payments—could alleviate substantially the negative effects now attributed to single parenthood. Other countries, such as France, Britain, and the Netherlands, provide better supports and have much lower rates of poverty among single parents than does Canada (Canadian Council on Social Development, 1992).

Second, female single parents face serious obstacles to economic success.

With few exceptions, the burden of childrearing has always been the responsibility of women. The single mother often shoulders the complete responsibility. She has the bulk of the financial burden for children and she is severely restricted in her ability to earn an adequate living. For example, even if child care is available, a woman with responsibility for children will be restricted in the number of hours she can work, is less able to work shift work, and will require a job with flexibility. . . . (Gunderson, Muszynski, & Keck, 1990, p. 19)

Third, available evidence does not support the view that single-parent families in themselves lead to poorer educational outcomes for children. Finn and Owings (1992) found no significant differences in school achievement between 2,500 children of single-parents and 12,500 other children when family income and social class were controlled. The National Child Development Study in Britain has traced a group of children born in 1958. Findings through age 16 showed that children from single-parent families had similar levels of school achievement once socioeconomic factors were taken into account (Ferri, 1993). Canadian data (Gee, 1993) also show no significant differences in educational attainment between children in single-parent and two-parent families when SES is controlled.

Griffith (1992) has described how the category of “single parent” became, in one large Canadian school district, a symbol of parental inadequacy and an excuse for children’s school problems. This is an unfair, even a dangerous form of labelling that educators must avoid.

#### LACK OF ATTENTION TO POVERTY

Just as the causes and correlates of poverty are multiple, so policies to address poverty must take various forms. Schools alone clearly cannot solve problems of poverty. Nonetheless, because education is so directly and strongly affected by poverty’s deleterious consequences, poverty should be an important educational concern. It does not presently have that status. Despite our knowledge of poverty’s important influence on education, responses to poverty have tended to play a marginal role in education policy and practice. Cries to improve education are common. Inadequate schooling is described as a menace to our standard of living and our future. It seems that every week brings a new pronouncement

from a provincial government or a school district about policies to improve educational outcomes. Yet a factor that, as much as any other, influences educational outcomes appears to be largely ignored. Simply put, if we are serious about educational reform, then we have to do more to address poverty as an educational issue.

One indicator of the low priority assigned to poverty in education is the level of resources committed to addressing the problem directly. Since poverty is such a powerful influence on educational outcomes, one might expect that school funding would reflect that knowledge—that schools with more poor children would receive significantly more money, and that support for anti-poverty programs would be an important part of school funding. That is not the case.

In every Canadian province the flow of resources to schools is based primarily on enrolment. Many provinces do provide additional revenue to school districts with lower property-tax wealth, but that does not necessarily direct funds to areas of poverty. As of 1988, only two provinces (Manitoba and Ontario) provided funding for compensatory education (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 1988). For example, Manitoba made about \$3 million available for this purpose in 1987 compared to overall spending on public education of more than \$800 million that year. Compare this to the more than \$60 million the province allocates each year for special education.

Maynes (1990, 1993) studied poverty as a policy issue in the Edmonton public schools. He interviewed principals, superintendents and school trustees. He found that though there was wide recognition of child poverty's effect on schools, the district did not collect data on poverty or its consequences, and that few or no formal policies were either in place or planned to address the issue. Even among principals in inner-city schools, who could speak forcefully and in detail about the nature of child poverty and its effects,

none of the principals referred to research or successful practice in other urban poor environments to argue that the programs they recommended would improve the success rates of poor children. . . .

Regardless of motivation, principals were not actively advocating poverty-related causes. It seems a paradox that, while they believed strongly that the districts should provide more support for the education of poor children, they were not assertively taking advantage of their opportunities to favorably influence the political will to bring that about. (Maynes 1990, p. 263, 265)

What keeps poverty from having a more prominent place in debates about education? The work of Maynes and others suggests several reasons. Many educators and policy makers believe that dealing with poverty is outside the mandate of the schools. Educators often cite expanding expectations of schools to provide social services as a problem that takes attention away from a more traditional educational mission.

A second factor is the lack of a sense of strategy as to how to address poverty. The administrators and trustees Maynes (1990) interviewed could not identify a set of policies and practices that would constitute the basis for addressing poverty issues in schools. The issue is seen as too big, too intractable for schools to deal with. Organization theory tells us that where no solutions are apparent, problems will get less attention (March, 1984; McCall & Kaplan, 1985).

Also important is the absence of any strong political lobby pressing for action. Like other organizations, schools tend to respond to issues placed on their agendas through various political processes. Groups lobbying against poverty tend to be weak. By definition poverty implies the absence of resources necessary for effective political organization.

Yet there is good reason to think that schools could and should do more to address issues of poverty even if they cannot solve them. Poverty is so closely connected with educational outcomes that ignoring it will likely reduce the efficacy of any other policies that may be adopted to improve schools. More importantly, there are strategies known to be successful with poor children and their families, even though they are not employed widely in Canadian education. In the remainder of this article I discuss three strategies that seem particularly useful—improving the quality of instruction received by poor children, strengthening preschool education, and building more links with parents and communities.

#### IMPROVING EDUCATION FOR THE POOR

##### *Improving Instruction*

Poor children, already facing obstacles when they begin school, often receive a lower-quality education than do their counterparts in less troubled settings. Schools' traditional response to students with low achievement has been some form of special or remedial education—withdrawal programs, special classes, tracking. Knapp and his colleagues (1991) studied instruction in three U.S. states in 85 elementary school classes with high concentrations of poor children. They describe the key tenets of beliefs about teaching children with low achievement as: emphasis on learners' deficits, a curriculum model requiring mastery of basics before any advanced skills can be taught, teacher-directed instruction, a focus on classroom management that is uniform across content areas, and use of ability grouping, including supplemental instruction through pull-out programs (p. 4).

Students in these settings may receive less instructional time instead of more. The instruction they do receive often focuses heavily on rote skill development, with little attention to higher-order skills. Students' own backgrounds and knowledge are typically not brought into the curriculum. Knapp, Turnbull, and Shields (1990) conclude that our typical practices for poor children set low expectations, place too much emphasis on behaviour control, use too much seat-

work, and greatly underemphasize learners' development of meaning. Anderson and Pelliger (1990) reach the same conclusion in their literature review.

Teachers are well aware of poverty's influence on students' readiness to learn. But there is a danger that accepting poverty's importance may also lead to accepting negative outcomes. Edwards and McKinnon (1987) concluded that the Nova Scotia teachers they studied "seem largely to accept the environmental-deficit position" (p. 343). Knapp et al. (1991) note that although teachers frequently attributed children's academic problems to their background of poverty, teachers did not alter their instructional practices consistent with these expressed beliefs to overcome some of the problems (pp. 172–173).

The issue is not, however, simply one of individual teachers' practices. Teaching practices are strongly influenced by school and school district organization and policy. Tracking and grouping are determined largely at the school, district, or provincial level, not by individual teachers. Testing and reporting policies of schools or districts can powerfully affect what teachers can or cannot do. Several studies (e.g., Coleman & LaRocque, 1990; Padilla & Knapp, in press) show clearly how a variety of school, district, and state or provincial policies constrain teachers' responses to poor children's needs. Knapp and Shields (1990) report that most teachers they studied simply followed the district's guidelines. Allington (1990), studying literacy instruction, "concluded that few schools have organized instructional resources such that children who need access to larger amounts of high-quality instruction actually experience such access" (p. I-3).

These findings do suggest some of the changes needed, though there are unlikely to be simple right answers to the question of how we should teach. In general, students with achievement difficulties should receive as stimulating and challenging an instructional program as possible. Basic skill development needs to be integrated with more advanced skills. Such instructional practices as scaffolding, heterogeneous grouping, proleptic teaching, building on students' prior knowledge, peer tutoring, and cognitive coaching all seem promising (Slavin, 1994; Stein, Leinhardt, & Bickel, 1989). Pullout programs do not appear to be particularly effective. Madden and Slavin (1989), reviewing evidence on the U.S. experience, conclude that

the achievement of at-risk students can be significantly increased, either by making relatively inexpensive but extensive modifications in the regular instructional program or by implementing relatively expensive but intensive interventions as pullout programs. (p. 71)

Finally, Neufeld (1990) notes the importance of seeing school processes as holistic rather than technical. She emphasizes the emotional and affective links between schools and students, and the importance of developing positive student-teacher relationships. Poor children may bring many additional burdens into school with them, so supportive and understanding teachers can be particularly important to them.



*Strengthening Preschool Education*

The rationale for preschool programs is to provide students with the background they will need to meet the demands of schooling. Early advocates of preschool programs often saw them as ways to fix poor children's deficiencies. More recent work has moved away from deficiency theories toward recognizing that there are multiple kinds of valid and useful knowledge. As long as schools require particular kinds of skills and behaviour, whether these are superior or not is a moot point; to be successful in school, children must master these practices, and preschool can provide a means of doing so.

Preschool education may be particularly important for children of single parents, not because such children are more likely than others to lack the skills schools want, but because good child care is critical to mothers' being able to work or attend school themselves, and thus to their improving their incomes and the living conditions of their children.

The long-term effects of Headstart and other early interventions remain controversial. Initial evaluations of Headstart indicated that it fell short of its proponents' claims (Silver & Silver, 1991). As experience with preschool programs accumulates there is growing consensus that they are valuable and can have long-lasting effects, especially with appropriate follow-up. Karweit (1989) concluded that "there is an immediate and sizeable cognitive effect for participation in preschool that is diminished but still detectable in the elementary grades" (p. 87). Other researchers have come to similar conclusions (Barnett & Escobar, 1987; Reynolds, 1993; Slavin, 1994; Stein, Leinhardt, & Bickel, 1989). The very positive long-term results of the Perry Pre-School program in Michigan are often cited (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993), although they involve only a small number of students. Another frequently cited exemplary program is James Comer's (1988) School Development Program.

A number of conceptual models of preschool education are being promoted, but no research evidence at this point strongly supports preferring one to another. Karweit (1989) concludes that having a thoughtful, well-implemented approach may be more important than the particular approach itself.

*Building Links with Parents and the Community*

Much has been written about the importance of working closely with parents. Families powerfully influence children and play a key role in fostering success even under difficult circumstances such as poverty (Reynolds, 1993). Howe (1990) has suggested that our main opportunity to improve students' learning now rests with parents and families more than with schools. Schools tend to see parents' role as to reinforce the school's skills and practices. The most powerful outcomes, however, appear to develop when there is true mutuality between the school and the community such that each party learns to value and respect the

knowledge, skills, and goals of the other. Schools then work with parents and families to promote the skills required for educational success, while also seeking input about adaptations the school needs to make to be more successful with students. Poor communities often contain large populations from minority cultural backgrounds, which means that educators need to be particularly open to examining school practices, not just asking parents to do things differently to fit traditional schooling. For example, schools with high concentrations of aboriginal students will need to work with aboriginal community groups to create successful models of schooling.

Many models exist for school-family-community collaboration. Nettles (1991) develops a taxonomy of four approaches—conversion (of students to fit the school model); mobilization (to increase citizen participation in education), allocation (using community resources to strengthen education), and instruction (teaching students about community relations). Her review of research provides many examples of each strategy. Included are prenatal programs, parent education, peer tutoring, work experience, parent or parent-child centres in schools, mentoring, integrated social service delivery in schools, and decentralization of school governance, to name a few. Nettles concludes that “programs can have positive effects on school-related behaviors and achievement as well as on attitudes . . . the consistency of positive outcomes . . . suggests that community programs may be potentially useful interventions” (p. 397).

High levels of poverty and low levels of education often found among single parents suggest that this could be an important area of work for schools. Programs that work with single parents have the potential to provide vital supports, to enhance these parents’ relations with their children, to give the school a better understanding of the families’ situations, and to assist women in very difficult situations to improve their own prospects. Programs for school-age single mothers are one part of a larger strategy.

Although not uncommon, all these activities tend to be supplemental or peripheral rather than part of schools’ core program. They command low levels of resources and are often more vulnerable to budget cuts than are traditional classroom-based programs. Teachers take on these tasks as additions to everything else they have to do. Schools continue to focus many more resources both on traditional programs and on remediation than they do on proactive work with parents and communities (Levin, 1994).

Schools are most likely to use strategies of conversion and allocation—focusing on working with parents to help children fit into schools successfully. There is reason to think, however, that an increased focus on mobilization activities may be valuable. One reason poverty is not more visible on the policy agenda of schools is the lack of political pressure from the poor. Where marginalized groups have organized themselves, improvements in educational outcomes have often followed. A good example is the steady improvement in First Nations

education in Canada as bands have taken over from the federal government control of band schools (Armstrong, Kennedy, & Oberle, 1990).

One important role educators could play would be to help poor families and communities organize to define and promote their own interests. Given the current stress on collegiality, community, and partnerships in education, working with poor communities to help them mobilize themselves seems a justifiable and useful strategy for schools. Although political mobilization has not been common in schools, it certainly has occurred, and it is common in such social services as social work and health care, where many professionals see it as part of their responsibility to help clients identify and work toward defending their interests.

Educators have a further responsibility in regard to poverty's political status, one that may be more acceptable to many: to remind the public that poverty is much more than an issue of schooling. Poverty's consequences for educational outcomes are enormous, and although I have argued that there are important measures schools can and should take, educators also need to take every opportunity to remind policy makers and the public that addressing poverty and improving educational outcomes must involve a total social policy effort. Although educators should do everything feasible to alleviate the effects of poverty, we must firmly refuse to accept responsibility for its existence or its eradication. As Males (1994) wrote about teenage pregnancy (itself strongly linked to poverty),

educators [should] frankly and publicly declare at every opportunity that schools have no magic wand with which to rescue the nation from . . . expedient anti-youth policies. Education lobbies are in a position to vigorously impress [sic] on policy makers the fact that reducing the incidence of early pregnancy requires comprehensive increases in support for impoverished families, for the prevention of child abuse, for the enforcement of laws governing payment of child support, and for investment in opportunities for young people. (p. 410)

#### POSSIBILITIES FOR CHANGE

Poverty is a vital educational concern. Schools cannot solve problems of poverty, and should say so publicly. At the same time, they can more effectively alleviate poverty's effects and, especially, assist poverty's victims to understand and advance their own welfare. We do have considerable knowledge about how to do so. None of these ideas is new or especially difficult to carry forward. But the necessary actions would require significant changes in how schools organize instruction, and how schools view and interact with parents and communities. Resources should be shifted from older and more advantaged students to the younger and less advantaged; from remediation to outreach; from working in the school to working with the community. Educators would need to be willing to share control much more widely than at present.

At the same time, there is potential synergy among the strategies suggested, which can be illustrated by a project just beginning at William Whyte School,

an inner-city school in Winnipeg. The school, which has grades K–8, has recently begun to include adults—largely poor, female, single parents—in its junior high program. Now they are working with a local family centre and a food co-op to develop a food services program in the school. Students will operate the program, learning about various aspects of business, food preparation, and nutrition. Curriculum will be relevant to students' lives without losing any of its academic challenge. The co-op will provide low-cost, nutritious food to poor families. Parents and children will work together around these tasks. Money will stay in the community instead of going to supermarket chains. Children and expectant mothers will be able to improve their diets. The community can work with the school to address an important issue.

Are such changes feasible on a large scale? I believe they are. Resource shifts are not simple to make, but they have been made—for example funds for computers or for special education have been found in recent years despite budget restraint. Our ideas about what is desirable also shift. Many currently accepted school practices were once considered impractical: French immersion, universal secondary education, and integration of physically handicapped persons are examples. All significant change looks impossible at the outset; the status quo looms large and the barriers look—and are—formidable. But changes do happen. If we did not believe this were possible, we would have to dismiss the idea of improvement in education.

In education we have learned that a combination of policy development, selective targeted funding (even of small amounts of money), ongoing professional development, and continued emphasis and discussion by leaders can bring about change in school organization and instructional practice (Slavin, 1994). Many school systems use these strategies in such areas as student assessment or drop-out prevention. Surely poverty, given its powerful effect on children's lives and futures, merits the same attention.

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