

# Children, Poverty and Schooling

By Nancy Mandell

*La relation entre l'éducation et la pauvreté est complexe mais importante dans la façon dont elle influe sur la vie des enfants pauvres, qui courent un plus grand risque en ce qui concerne les nombreux problèmes physiques, psychologiques, sociaux et culturels.*

## Poverty-Induced Dropping Out

The relationship between education and poverty is complex but important in the way it affects the lives of children. Compared to non-poor children, poor children are at great risk for a multitude of problems, including physical, psychological, social, cultural, and educational.

- In 1990, the total number of children under 16 living in poverty was approximately 953,000. The majority of these poor children lived in two-parent (two adult) families.
- Twenty-seven to thirty per cent of Canadian youth drop out and do not complete high school.
- Forty-five per cent of children from poor families are likely to drop out of high school.
- Poor families account for only 13 per cent of all Canadian families with children but they account for 23 per cent of all dropouts in the 16- and 17-year age group.
- Over the next 20 years, approximately 187,000 students will leave school. About 11,000 of these dropouts each year are due to poverty alone.
- The overall rate of functional illiteracy in Canada was 24 per cent in 1987. Only 25 per cent of functionally illiterate women are in the paid labour force in 1986, compared with 50 per cent of women as a whole in that year. Illiteracy is related to income-earning. Women with less than grade eight education earn on average only 59 per cent of what men earn.

Educational attainment is a very reliable indicator of upward social mobility, employment stability, and higher income. Someone without a high school education is four times more likely to be poor than a university graduate. (National Council of Welfare) The elevated school dropout rate of children from poor families means these adolescents end up more frequently as low-productivity and intermittently employed workers. (Ross and Shillington)

Why do children raised in poverty perform poorly at school? Poor dropouts tend to come from urban areas and live in families which hold less than 49 weeks of employment each year. (Ross and Shillington) A deprived material environment leads to unmet needs and alienation. (Ross and Shillington) The poor physical and mental health resulting from being raised in poverty makes learning difficult. Evidence exists that children are now more frequently kept from school because of poverty. More children are likely to arrive at school hungry and leave still hungry. (Jeffs)

Hungry children and malnourished children cannot perform to their full potential in the classroom. They have trouble paying attention and concentrating. As one report notes,

The physical symptoms displayed by hungry children include crying, throwing up water, pale skin, weakness, stomach cramping, headaches, dizziness and fatigue. Children may also appear disgruntled, antagonistic, irritable, restless, dizzy, unable to concentrate, and less inclined to learn. (Canadian Teacher's Federation)

The Ontario Child Health Study (1983) demonstrates that the odds of a poor child failing a grade or attending special education classes full or part-time are three times those of non-poor children. (Ross and Shillington) Rates of poor school performance are also much higher for girls than for boys. For example,

according to Ross and Shillington, for young girls between the ages of six and eleven years living in families on social assistance, the rate of poor school performance is 28 per cent, compared to six per cent for those families not on social assistance.

### Are poor children being pushed out of school?

According to a report by the Canadian Teacher's Federation (CTF) entitled, "Children, Schools and Poverty" (1989), many low income children experience lower achievement, less participation in extra-curricular activities, less motivation to learn, delayed cognitive development, different types of teacher-student interactions, negative effects of streaming, lower career aspirations and expectations, interrupted school attendance, lower university attendance, increased risk of illiteracy, and higher dropout rates. Poor children tend to experience difficulties in schools and have limited prospects for higher education. An OEDC survey of 19 countries found social differences in educational participation a pervasive and constant characteristic of all educational structures. Poor children around the world are being pushed out of school.

Among the most alarming of the finding from various studies:

- There is a persistent tendency for middle-class children to receive greater teacher attention, praise, and other rewards, while lower-class children receive criticism and punishment. Students perceive teacher encouragement to play a highly significant role in bolstering their self-esteem and keeping them in school.

- Lower-class children are often labelled early in their educational careers as potential failures. Poor children are disproportionately placed in basic-level or vocational programmes. A 1983 Toronto Board of Education study reported that middle-class children were almost twice as likely (88 per cent) as working-class children (46 per cent) to be placed in advanced university-bound high school courses. (Wright and Tsuji)

- Is it any wonder that poor children are more likely than non-poor children to report disliking their teachers, feeling bored with and disliking school, and feeling rejected and ignored by the school system?

- Poor children cannot afford the expensive "free education" they are receiving. They participate less in extra-curricular activities, less in school-based sports and recreational activity, and receive one-third to one-half the rate of instruction in music, hockey, and swimming due to the costs and difficulties associated with transportation, fees, equipment, child care, and human energy. (Offord, Last, and Barrette) Studies of dropouts note that they are often alienated or unattached to any aspect of the school—without emphasizing that lack of financial encouragement or subsidization remains the root cause of student disaffection. Poor students are literally pushed out of extra-curricular school activities.

### Educational equity

Educational equity aims to develop mechanisms to expand access to schooling and to implement strategies to improve student experiences both inside and outside the classroom. There are numerous suggestions. Only a few are mentioned here.

### School-Based Initiatives

**Food programmes:** Numerous cities in Canada, including Toronto, Ottawa, Hamilton, Montreal, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Vancouver, and Regina are now providing school breakfasts and snacks. How many other teachers also bring food themselves to their classes? Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. While many non-hungry children often skip breakfast, when missing this meal is combined with missing lunch, or eating a nutritionally inadequate meal, student performance deteriorates.

**Curriculum:** Resource units have been developed to bring the issue of poverty into the classroom. The CTF report lists a range of student activities including role-playing life on welfare or on the minimum wage; analyzing social inequality in Canada; making a video about living in poverty; playing the Poverty Game (a monopoly-like board game designed to sensitize players to life below the poverty line); fasting for a few days; visiting a food bank; organizing a youth advocacy group.

**Teachers:** Eleven Winnipeg schools have introduced full-time migrancy teachers and aides to deal with student mobility and retention to maintain academic enrollment. Their goal is to monitor the students who transfer to new schools in order to ensure a successful transition.

Schools have increasing and multiple demands placed on them. No one expects schools to solve all of the problems that children bring with them to school. Yet schools must recognize their role in contributing to, and exacerbating, children's disadvantage through curricula and programmes, performance standards, geographical location, facilities, sources of funding, and staff. Our school children are our future. Endowing them with material and intellectual success represents an investment in Canada's well-being.

### References

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