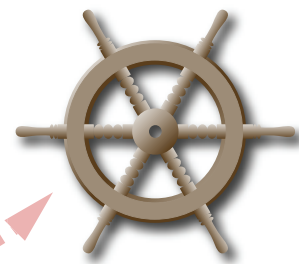


Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Effects of Poverty in Our Schools

by Debbie McIsaac, Executive Staff Officer, Professional Initiatives

At the recent American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting the focus was on the link between what is happening in educational research and the possibilities for tackling persisting issues in education and their innovative resolution to assist in improving learning and well-being of our students. One of the areas of research presented, which is always in the forefront of discussion among educators in our province, was the issue of poverty and its impact on learning.

New technologies can provide more choice and opportunities for customized learning, provide what is often seen as efficient ways of obtaining data to assess academic progress, and remediate problems that predict the needs of future learning, however; accountability for what is happening outside of school is often not considered. Researchers struggle with the concept of using such technologies to aid in closing the achievement gap between students on either end of the socio-economic continuum.

Teachers see first-hand the effects of poverty on students every day in their classrooms and schools. This can range from being too hungry or too tired to be actively engaged, feeling excluded because they do not have financial supports to participate in programs or activities to having little or no home support because parents or guardians are forced to work out of province or keep two jobs just to pay the bills.

The negative impact poverty has on student learning and development is well documented. Research conducted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation has shown that: *many low-income children experience reduced motivation to learn, delayed cognitive development, lower achievement, less participation on extra-curricular activities, lower career aspirations, interrupted school attendance, lower university attendance, an increased risk of lower literacy rates, and higher drop-out rates.* The most recent statistics on Canadian child poverty shows Nova Scotia has the fifth highest provincial rate of child poverty (17.3 per cent) in the country. The presence of child poverty and the effect it has on shaping the learning experience and opportunities for our students, is played out daily in our classrooms.

Given that educators, in their day-to-day contact with students, experience the impact poverty has on student learning they recognize can play a major role in improving the learning and academic performance

of children. Strategies to support these disadvantaged students should include providing teachers, administrators and other staff with on-going professional development and resources necessary to support the development of effective teachers and teaching to meet the ever-increasing needs of these students. CTF contends that to address poverty-related student needs, we must look at factors such as: *class size and composition; school resource personnel; and school budgets.*

The unfortunate reality we often see ourselves in, as educators, is being caught up in the misconception that teacher and teaching quality is the lone assailant on student performance. The media attention given to measures of student success such as standardized or large scale test scores does little to address the complex issues impacting the learning process and the fact that poverty has long been an indicator of how well a child will do in school. To use the results of these test scores to evaluate a teacher's or school's performance is not only a misguided approach to evaluation, but negates the importance of recognizing the effect of poverty on public education.

While we know the learning process is heavily impacted by influences outside of schools, teachers continue to be held increasingly more accountable for student performance. Although statistical models of testing may attempt to control for things such as student characteristics, it is impossible to account for differences in classroom composition and the many home and school influences that reach far beyond the individual classroom teacher or collective school efforts. The assumption that these test scores measure the full range of achievement and students are randomly assigned to a teacher does not fit into the reality of the teaching environment. To assume that teachers teach similar students under similar conditions from school to school and student performance is not affected by learning conditions or socio-economic conditions is ignoring the fact that any measure which is influenced by factors outside of the teacher or school control is not a valid measure. The use of measures such as test scores to evaluate teachers and schools, labelling them as good teachers or poor teachers, high performing schools or under-performing schools runs the risk of missing the big picture and what are the true factors influencing the ability of a child to succeed in school.



Poverty is an issue that more and more of our province's children are facing. As increasing numbers of children are entering schools with needs that schools are not prepared to meet, our classrooms are becoming more diverse than ever before making teaching and learning more challenging. If the focus was on student

learning and the factors that impact the success of this learning rather than on the labelling of teachers and schools as poor or under-performing, and strategies and policies were put in place to support teachers and schools, a high standard of education and an equitable chance to succeed would be the possibility for all our students.

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