How can schools address the inequities often associated with poverty and schooling?

Research Tells Us

- Successful school-based strategies for addressing inequities often associated with poverty range from enhancing teacher awareness to community partnerships to changes in professional practice.
- These strategies have garnered excellent advancements across Ontario.

Poverty and Schooling: Where Mindset Meets Practice

Dr. Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker  
Brock University

Canada is a very rich nation, yet in Ontario one in five children live in poverty. This rate more than doubles for children in female-headed, single-parent households, and children of First Nations, Métis, Inuit (FNMI), racialized, and new immigrant families. Despite many public statements made over the past two decades in support of the elimination of child poverty, the child poverty rate has not improved. Recent findings suggest the gap between the highest- and lowest-income schools is rising, and note a significant increase in instances of poverty in virtually every school in Ontario.

This monograph explores what poverty looks like in the current economic reality and takes the position that we must look beyond the visible indicators of poverty to the social conditions that produced it. It suggests a range of strategies to address the inequities often associated with poverty and schooling.

Eradicating Child Poverty

Eradicating child poverty is a complex issue. Society often defaults to blaming those who live in poverty, thus rationalizing a “culture of poverty.” Understanding the conditions that create and sustain poverty requires that we reframe our thinking and push past preconceived notions of class, race, culture, and stereotypes of what it means to be poor. We must focus on the conditions of poverty rather than attributing the problem to students and families who experience poverty. It may be easy to assign blame to families when our students are not performing in school, or it may be very tempting to lower learning expectations for students. Neither

DARLENE CIUFFETELLI PARKER is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Brock University. She was a school administrator, literacy resource-consultant, and elementary teacher in Toronto for over 15 years before joining the department of teacher education at Brock University.
is a solution. Instead, we need to work to address the more deeply rooted issues. We need to view children and families living in poverty in terms of their possibility and promise rather than their deficiencies.⁵

Current research on poverty and schooling attempts to disrupt and critique deficit frameworks of poverty; it seeks thereby to understand the contexts in which students and families live and learn.⁶,⁷,⁸,⁹ The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario’s Poverty Project, for example, both demonstrates the complexities of working in school communities affected by poverty and promotes ways to better serve students and communities affected by poverty.

When teachers challenge their assumptions and their preconceptions, they begin to understand the ways in which their own practice – in their class, at their school – should change. In some school communities, families may be characterized by intergenerational poverty; in others, there may be instances of episodic poverty, largely related to economic factors (e.g., business closures and downsizing of manufacturing companies in southern Ontario). Conditions in small, urban schools may vary from those in rural or suburban areas. School-based strategies for teachers – such as professional development on the topic of incorporating collaborative inquiry as the basis for looking at poverty and student learning – are ways for schools to approach a deeper understanding of poverty and its impact on education.

Implications for Practice

School-based strategies to address the inequities associated with poverty and schooling include those that focus on enhancing teacher awareness, building school culture, and enhancing professional practice in the classroom.

Enhancing Teacher Awareness

Provide professional-development opportunities that develop understanding of, and sensitivity to, issues related to poverty.

Plan sessions that explore poverty and its conditions, associated stereotypes and impact on schooling.⁶,⁷,¹⁰,¹¹ Encourage teachers to look beyond the visible conditions of poverty in order to reframe their thinking and adapt their teaching. Encourage school teams to engage in site-based, collaborative inquiry to explore preconceived assumptions and stereotypes associated with families living in poverty as well as to reflect on their practices in classrooms and schools. Involve faculty of education researchers and resource personnel from school districts, incorporate programming from federations in focused professional learning or share Ontario-based research and resources on poverty.⁶,¹¹,¹²

Seek to understand the context in which students and their families live.

Whether in urban, suburban, rural, or remote school communities, educators working in schools need to understand the context of their workplace and of the community that surrounds it. When context (including historical traditions and demographics) is made relevant, teachers are better able to understand their students and their families. Understanding, and becoming part of, the lived narrative account of school and community is critical to success, as it relates to the resilience of people living in poverty.⁶,⁷
Building School Culture

*Talk about the kids you love (and resist deficit language).*

Break the typical pattern of negative discussion about students by hosting weekly staff breakfasts where teachers can “talk about the kids they love” and the challenges they face in order to develop a more positive, bias-free school climate and culture. When educators resist stereotyping students and families based on low-income living, their attitudes about the interaction between poverty and schooling shift from simple answers to more complex understandings; notably, they shift away from deficit-based assumptions about students’ capacity to learn or families’ interests in their children’s success.

*Engage families outside and inside the walls of the school.*

Employ school strategies that demonstrate respectful inclusivity (e.g., address newsletters with “Dear Families” rather than “Dear Parent/Guardian”). Make the shift from “teaching parents what to do” to engaging them in the life of the school. For example, instead of the traditional family literacy nights, designed to “teach parents how to read with children,” host literacy nights that celebrate children’s accomplishments, bringing teachers and parents in conversation through family fun nights, celebrations, Olympic-themed nights, or adults’ literacy experiences in other cultures.¹³

*Forge community partnerships.*

Collective responsibility and leadership among teachers/educators in schools, combined with the broader community, help to build connections that ensure student and school success. For example, schools and teachers can seek funding for nutrition programs or after-school programs. They can also establish a school-community team, focusing solely on making community connections (e.g., by scheduling guest storytellers or public health screenings or by engaging advocates, volunteers or social services).¹¹ Similarly, schools and teachers can connect with community partners by making the school the “community hub” (e.g., by establishing family centres/groups within the school, recreation/fitness centres linked to school, after-school homework clubs, Boys and Girls Clubs, or YMCA after-school programs),⁶ or with other organizations related to faith, health, or finance (e.g., bank representatives, grocers, or cultural clubs). These strategies have garnered excellent advancements in many schools across Ontario.⁶,¹¹

Enhancing Professional Practice

*Expect all children to succeed.*

Make connections to students’ prior knowledge and scaffold learning opportunities. Ensure that all students are supported in their academic achievement through the use of higher-order questioning and graphic organizers, or employ strategies for building resilience such as fostering humanitarianism and positive attitudes and emotions. Strategies that are related to both academic and emotional success have been found to be effective in schools.⁶,¹¹

*Use classroom community-building strategies that foster a positive and inclusive environment and respect for diversity.*

Favour classroom community-based resources over individual resources/possessions for each child, which accentuate difference. Focus on building...
resilience by encouraging positive attitudes (e.g., Character Education), making emotional connections (e.g., Roots of Empathy), and supporting humanitarianism in schools (e.g., Me to We social-justice program). Think about films, such as Freedom Writers, that seek to honour student and family contexts by incorporating their community narrative into their everyday teaching.

Interrogate representations of poverty in children’s literature to enhance student understanding.

Promote social awareness through a variety of themes and contexts for various grade levels. For example, media literacy can help students compare and use critical thinking and perspective to evaluate commercials, YouTube music clips, and newspaper articles related to poverty. Literature is another vehicle for promoting social awareness. (See page 3 sidebar for helpful resources.)

In Sum

In a healthy, thriving community, the classroom, the school, and the community work together for the success of children, youth, and families. Building trusting relationships among teachers, students, and parents is important for successful schools. Communication between and among the students, the school, and the larger community must be ever-present, consistent, and should rely on the efforts of all stakeholders. Respectful, relational partnerships, with a goal of developing a better understanding of the issues related to how poverty affects families, schools and communities, is a step in the right direction for equity and education, and for the success of all children in Ontario.

REFERENCES

Research reported by the author was funded by the Ministry of Education via a grant from the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario. Consultation by ETFO executive staff member Jim Giles was also provided for this monograph.


What Works? is updated and posted at: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/WhatWorks.html
ISSN 1913-1097 What Works? Research Into Practice (Print)
ISSN 1913-1100 What Works? Research Into Practice (Online)