Social Planning Network of Ontario

B A C K G R O U N D E R

Achieving Equity and Inclusion for Children Affected by Poverty[1]

Schools can't do everything but they can do a lot

For over 50 years, there has been solid research evidence that poverty has a serious negative impact on children's education. Beginning with the 1966 Coleman report in the U. S., studies have established firm links between poverty and lower levels of educational achievement. Since then, there has been extensive research on what schools can do to close the 'achievement gap' using strategies to improve test scores, increase student engagement, and support students to stay in school.

The goal of achieving equity generally includes three dimensions:

a) improving/equalizing access to educational opportunities and resources, such as good teachers, programs, technology, music and arts, school trips;

b) improving/equalizing outcomes as measured by test results, graduation rates; and

c) improving how students experience school (feeling included/belonging, safe, respected)

Concerns about school climate and how students *experience* school - whether they feel included, safe, respected and have a sense of belonging – are gaining recognition as also being important in improving equity. The Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced its Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy in 2009, stating: "To achieve an equitable and inclusive school climate, school boards and schools will work to ensure that all members of the school community feel safe,

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[1] The research literature may also use low income, low SES (socio-economic status), family background or, more recently, economically marginalized.

comfortable, and accepted. We want all staff and students to value diversity and to demonstrate respect for others and a commitment to establishing a just, caring society."

Why now? The Ministry answered this by saying that discrimination, bullying, hate propaganda, intolerance, racism, homophobia and gender-based violence demand attention because they can "lead to students feeling rejected, excluded and isolated at school. This may result in behaviour problems in the classroom, decreased interest in school, lower levels of achievement and higher dropout rate" (MOE, 2009).

In the past, some argued that schools are very limited in what they can do since poverty originates outside of school and factors such as family background may have a greater impact on achievement than anything that happens in school. Others took the view that education can act as the "great equalizer" by compensating for the poverty and inequality that exist in the broader society. Schools have increasingly taken on - or been assigned - responsibility for many aspects of children's well-being, including programs focused on children affected by poverty. Cautioning against the "false ideas" that schools can do nothing or that schools can do everything, Flessa (2007) advises that "the challenge is to tell a consistent story about the importance of school initiatives in the context of other mutually supportive social policies" (p. 4).

Where does inequality in educational outcomes come from?
While there is agreement that poverty matters, there are different perspectives on what it is about poverty - or, for that matter, what it is about schools - that affects student outcomes. Some common perspectives on why children affected by poverty may not do as well in school are:

- The disadvantage children experience in the family or in the home results in children not coming to school 'ready to learn';
- Societal prejudices, such as racism or 'classism' may lead to lower expectations and school practices, such as streaming, that get in the way of success;
- Inequalities that exist outside of school are exacerbated or reproduced in schools and often result in reduced learning and participation opportunities, e.g. student fees or unequal fundraising capacity;
- A 'deficit framework' that focuses on what students don't have or can't do, rather than on what they do have or can do.

Research helps us to understand the complexity of the issues related to poverty and schooling. We now know, for example, how the conditions of poverty and, in particular the stressors that accompany living in poverty, affect brain development in young children. While this requires a preventative rather than remedial strategy that is likely outside the scope of the school system, school leaders can certainly advocate for such strategies to address the effects of poverty.

Strategies to promote equity and inclusion in education

The 'story' told by researchers and practitioners on what needs to be "fixed" – children, families, the economy, communities, schools – shape the strategies, policies and practices advanced to increase equity in education. While there is no magic bullet, there are a number of strategies that emerge from the literature that, when used in conjunction with each other, can bring about equity and inclusion for students affected by poverty.

1. *Challenge attitudes and prevailing mindsets.* This includes identifying prejudices and reducing deficit thinking; raising teachers' expectations ; resisting the urge to blame parents; and endeavouring to understand the lives/contexts of students outside of school. (We have to acknowledge something before we can change it or even want to change it).

2. *Improve teaching and learning.* This includes focused remedial and academic interventions that are known to make a difference, such as mentoring and tutoring; changes to pedagogy and instruction, such as making teaching more intellectually engaging and ensuring that children affected by poverty receive as challenging a curriculum as other students; and a focus on professional education.

3. *Use policy levers* to eliminate or limit streaming and tracking; ensure adequate funding for targeted programs; and reduce the need for (inequitable) fundraising in schools.

4. *Strengthen connections with parents and communities*. The significance of parent and community involvement is identified as critical to ensuring equity by governments and international bodies such as the Organization for Economic Development and

Cooperation (OECD). There is research evidence that practitioners and policy-makers must not rely only on "off the shelf" strategies. Local community-based or on-site strategies are vitally important to develop local knowledge to increase equity for students affected by poverty.

Prepared by Christa Freiler, August 4, 2017

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