

Poverty and Education: A Niagara Perspective



Every month, 770,000 people in Canada use food banks with 40% of those relying on food banks for children. In Ontario there are over 148,000 children whose families depend on this social service. The gap between low income and high income earners has increased which has led many Ontarians to work longer hours. Incomes for the bottom 40% of workers have fallen, while incomes for those in the middle have stood still. The only significant gains have been made by the wealthiest income earners. This seems to be leading to the disappearance of the middle class.

The human face of this rising inequality is the prevalence of children living in poverty. Today, 1 in 7 children live in poverty in Ontario. The statistic rises to 1 in 4 for Aboriginal children living in extreme poverty.

Rates of poverty are more than double for lone-mother headed households, and children of Aboriginal, racialized, and new immigrant families. Forty-five percent of children living below the poverty line have at least one parent working full time, full year, yet the average low-income family earns \$7000 per year below the poverty line. One in 5 children has access to licensed child care. In Niagara, over 5400 children are living in poverty and there are several schools categorized as 'high risk'. Although there have been many public statements supporting the elimination of child poverty for more than 20 years, the child poverty rate has not improved.

Information in this brief is adapted from the following research documents:

Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker. 2010. *Possibilities: An impact analysis of schools working with children and communities affected by poverty*. Toronto: Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.

Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker & J. Flessa. 2011. *Poverty and schools in Ontario: How seven elementary schools are working to improve education*. Toronto: Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.

This policy brief describes findings and recommendations arising from two research projects. The Ontario Poverty Project, a large project of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), was funded by the Ministry of Education. As part of the project, ETFO commissioned research to investigate 11 successful schools across Ontario that deal with educational issues related to poverty. The research resulted in a recent book publication. The second was an impact study of poverty and education, also commissioned by ETFO, that investigated the influence of teachers' practice and school planning when professional development on issues related to poverty and education took place. This research resulted in a report and recommendations for educational stakeholders.

This policy brief is based on findings from the studies on poverty and schooling that were designed to provide a close-to-the-ground description of the attitudes, beliefs, practices, and policies of schools that are successfully working with students and communities affected by poverty. The research examined the context-specific ways that schools have become "success stories," and investigated what these stories have in common throughout schools across Ontario and Niagara.

The sample included six small schools from urban areas (i.e., approximately 140 students per school), three large schools from urban areas (i.e., about 650 students per school), one suburban school, and one rural school. Our schools' student populations ranged demographically from those that were all White and English-speaking to a school that was 50% new



immigrant and English-language learners to a school in which the majority of students were Aboriginal.

During several school visits, key teachers, administrators, parents, and community groups were interviewed and different programmatic policies and practices were described. Over 100 participants were asked *what* the school did to build positive schooling experiences for children and communities affected by poverty, *how* those programs or policies came to be and how they were implemented, and *why* the programmatic direction was chosen for the specific school.

The second project used the same approach to explore the impact of *professional development* on five schools and teams within those schools affected by poverty in the Niagara region. This overarching question was asked: *how has the professional development your school team*

received impacted your work in schools affected by poverty?

Both projects shed much-needed light on the ways that Canadian schools have sought to address and better serve students and communities affected by poverty. The research demonstrates how some schools in Ontario have taken up that challenge, and the complexities that come with how to work in communities affected by poverty.

In recent years, school boards across Ontario have been challenged by other issues such as low student enrolment, lack of engagement by students and parents, and other realities of current schooling. These issues have been addressed in some publicly funded districts by opening specialty or alternative schools such as: culturally specific schools (i.e. Afro-centric, Ukrainian, girls-only and boys-only schooling, sports and wellness schools, French immersion schools, International Baccalaureate (IB) schools, arts and music based schools).

There has been less controversy with such alternative schools when they are in line with historical middle class values. There is more debate on culturally-based schools, or on specialty schools serving low-income students. Most specialty schools report success of academic student learning based on results of standardized testing. However, the definition of what it means for a school to be successful varies. In the research, issues such as school climate, community connections, parental engagement, school leadership, and collaborative inquiry were considered. These topics do not appear on student standardized tests but they are, undeniably, ways to measure success. The

research moved away from data-driven test results and towards in-depth conversations about how teachers' work impacted the academic and emotional achievement of students in the schools they served. The following section explores themes and insights garnered from the two research projects in Ontario and Niagara.

The Myths about Poverty and How Stereotyping Infiltrates Schools

The research on poverty and schools emphasizes how important, as well as difficult, it is for educators and the general public to avoid viewing students from low-income families as lacking. This is referred to as a deficit way of thinking about our society and our children. The general public, educators and community members alike, carry hidden biases as a filter to help explain the conditions of our society. This kind of filter, however, does not help children who live in poverty or the accessibility to the equal education that they deserve, no matter their living conditions.

It is important for the public to reframe thinking and focus on the conditions of poverty rather than the problem being the people who experience poverty. It may be easy for educators to assign blame to families when their students are not performing in school, or it may be very tempting to lower learning expectations for students. Neither is good. The research shows that it is necessary to understand and work towards the more deeply-rooted issues, and all schools need the support to do this. Ultimately, we need to look at our children, our students, and see what is there rather than what is not there.

How Schools Are Working to Improve Education in Schools Affected by Poverty

The difficult question is what to do about the stark reality of unequal situations in which children grow up.



Teacher Inquiry: Educator Perspectives

When teachers begin the challenging work of examining their own practice and understanding the ways that it should improve, there are multiple ways to make changes. However, a “one best practice” that will “fix all schools” does not exist. Each school that was researched was unique in demographics, size, and region. Thus, site-based inquiry is important in determining how to serve children and families affected by poverty. In some schools, for example, it may be an issue of intergenerational poverty, in other schools it may be a sudden concern of episodic poverty, which has been evidenced in the Niagara area due in part to the downturn of the manufacturing industry in recent years. How to deal with the specific issues of poverty in schools comes down to educators at each school site coming

together to look at their practices in classrooms and as a school community, collaborating with one another, engaging with parents, and inquiring into how the larger community comes into play.

In Niagara, a teacher who had received professional development on issues of poverty said that learning more about poverty for her was about “raising awareness” and that subsequent learning for many teachers in Niagara is needed to continue “to keep the connections alive” and to “go into more depth” on issues of families affected by poverty. Otherwise, the teacher admitted all learning and information about teaching in communities affected by poverty “would be lost.”

All of these factors contribute to the professional knowledge of teachers which depends on the content of the inquiry and how it relates directly to the context of each specific school. In another Niagara school where community connections to several agencies were very strong, one teacher admitted that working at the school for many years was a vocation for her but that learning about issues of poverty helped her change her practice further. She stated, “That was the first professional development I’ve done that had a really strong collaborative approach, so I noticed a difference in my feelings with colleagues since then, trusting your colleagues and waiting for things to come out in the group is something I’ve worked on since then. And I went on to take [a few more courses] on critical thinking and growing into your teaching career.”

Collaboration amongst teachers and parents in many of the Niagara schools was

improved after the professional development series on poverty. Of course, collaboration did exist before new learning on issues of poverty was provided to teachers and school teams, but the stance on poverty – addressing the elephant in the room – gave way to new thinking about addressing the needs of students and families in the communities in which they live.

Learning more about poverty led to reflections by teachers and administrators in Niagara on the day-to-day situations that children affected by poverty live; ultimately, there emerged a deeper understanding by teachers of the daily grind of school in such circumstances, and how it affects learning at both the academic and social level. At one Niagara school, teachers highlighted that their new learning about poverty helped them “gain new knowledge about poverty and a deeper sensitivity to poverty issues.” Others at this school remarked that their “eyes were opened” and they were less likely to judge what they saw. One teacher said it helped her “reframe her thinking.”

It is important to understand that teacher collaboration is not a panacea for the conditions of poverty on schooling. Teacher inquiry is one piece of the puzzle, among many other factors and supports found in successful schools.

School Climate and Culture

The schools that were researched in all areas of Ontario and in Niagara were concerned with building community outside and inside the school. Small population schools repeatedly demonstrated the notion of caring adults who know each and

every student, and they saw this as integral to making the school a place where students want to be. Connections are vital, such as school assemblies, teachers and parents engaged with one another, the space and place of a school as welcoming to members of the larger community. The successes in each school allow for the small stories that teachers, principals, parents, and community members share. We see this in one parent’s response: “The thing is, I am a single mother, and I love the school...I tried to be involved in my son’s life. [The teachers] saw the potential I had...It’s motivated me to go to school...and I’m finishing in June to be a social worker....The teachers and principal helped me to build my self-esteem, and they let me know that my son [and I] can get help.”

Making Community Connections

As well as making the climate welcoming inside school walls, schools in both studies described the importance of making connections between school and home and between school and community agencies. Collective responsibility, mentoring, and coaching were combined with community partnerships to understand better the realities of poverty, to help build community relationships, and to ensure success through a nurturing culture of care. Programs are important, and making connections is the biggest challenge for every school. Teachers and administrators go above and beyond regular workload, for example, to write grant applications in order to receive funding for nutrition programs, after school programs, and other partnerships. This was evidenced in at least two of the Niagara schools researched.

Engaging parents in school activities remains an ongoing issue by all schools in this study. In particular in the Niagara schools, more professional development was suggested by school teams in order to address the recurring issue of engaging parents in communities affected by poverty. One Niagara principal shared a past school culture of ‘locking parents out’ and he welcomed a change in school climate and culture under his leadership. His idea to have weekly staff breakfasts to ‘talk about the kids we love’ was a strategy to develop a more positive climate and culture into the school.

In many schools, although some teachers and staff members exhibited deficit views on parental engagement, there was an incremental shift from speaking about parents as not involved in school community to thinking more deeply about how to involve and respect parents’ participation. For example, in Niagara, past traditional Family Literacy Nights were originally organized to “teach parents how to read with children.” A turn toward respecting parents’ place on the educational landscape was evidenced by literacy nights that were transformed to celebrating children’s accomplishments, bringing teachers and parents in conversation through ‘family fun nights’, ‘celebrations’, ‘Olympic themed nights’, and so on. This involved a tremendous commitment by teachers, parents, and community workers to encourage the participation of all community members. At another Niagara school, an initiative on a character education program (CHAMPS = program that teaches responsibility, effort, cooperation, and respect) as well as



focusing on major funding from a prosperity grant (which the principal spearheaded) provided after-school programming and meals by various organizations.

Other accomplishments that were cited by principals in the Niagara schools researched were the efforts by all teachers to scaffold information for students at each grade level. The shift in thinking about and teaching students in impoverished communities also shifted greatly the already heroic efforts of teachers in these schools. Thus, if we compare these efforts to middle income schools, where fundraising by parent councils is a staple for co-curricular activities, we can understand a dire inequity of schooling here: the fact is that schools that could most use extra funds for activities are precisely the ones least positioned to raise them, and to the detriment of teachers’ workload and significant time distracted from the curriculum of the classroom.

Thus, the schools in this study that experienced the most success in making connections actively resisted deficit-based stereotyping and, rather, relied on learning

more about what matters to parents and families.

School Leadership

There are many ways that a team of educators, parents, and community members can share the leadership responsibilities for initiating and sustaining school success. For instance, identifying a handful of key individuals who can convene conversations about poverty, who keep colleagues interested and motivated, and who provide access to various supports, makes a significant difference. The administrator of a school sets the tone in the school for continuous teacher inquiry, community connections and the overall success of the school climate and culture.



What can Niagara do?

Following are recommendations from both studies for policymakers, teachers, and the community at large.

For Policymakers

- Acknowledge that there is a tremendous workload on teachers working in schools affected by poverty. The government needs to review policy and intervene by providing time, resources and additional personnel committed to making connections to the community.

- Review policy on nutritional programs. Nutritional programs are essential but cannot be replaced with the expertise on teachers' instructional workload and time needed to devote to teaching strategies. While local agencies are becoming increasingly involved in such efforts, there is a need for provincial commitments to such programs.
- Review policies on fundraising. The students affected by poverty are denied the same diversified educational experiences that are afforded other students in middle and upper income schools.
- Create incentives for teacher inquiry and create opportunities for community partnerships.

For Teachers

- Resist deficit-based language, become aware of biases that educators and others may keep as a filter and change to language that is more appropriate in order to restore respect and dignity for all humanity.
- Place realistic boundaries on workload. All teachers may be considered heroes, but the 'hero teacher image' can be detrimental to issues on excessive work, burn out and the sustainability of success in schools that rely on one or few hero teachers' efforts.
- Seek professional development on issues related to poverty and schooling and how inquiry-based collaboration is optimal to school success. As one teacher put it, "That was the first PD I've done that had a really strong collaborative approach, so I noticed a difference in my feelings with colleagues since then, trusting your colleagues and waiting for things to come out in the

group is something I've worked on since then. And I went on to take [a few more courses] on critical thinking and growing into your teaching career."

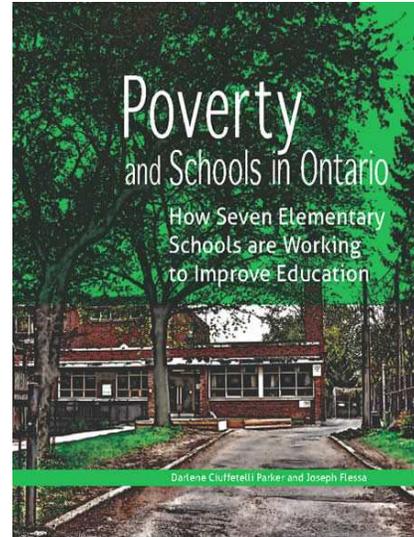
- Seek community connections that support teachers' work in classrooms.

"What we have in common is greater than that which sets us apart."

For the Community and Community at Large

Poverty is a multifaceted problem and schools alone cannot fix the issues.

- Acknowledge that teachers working in schools affected by poverty often go above and beyond regular workload hours, sometimes resulting in burn out.
- Entire communities need to challenge biases and learn more about families and children and the context in which they live.
- Acknowledge that poverty exists everywhere, not only in specific demographically located schools. Thus, we all need to be educated further and more research needs to be done in all schools on this matter and the community needs to be involved in such research.
- As parents, you can influence the curriculum of schools and larger discussions of the issues of poverty and schooling in how that relates directly to the context of your school community.



- Acknowledge that small incremental changes are important steps. What we have in common is greater than that which sets us apart.

In a healthy thriving community, the school and community work together for the success of children, youth and families. Communication between 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 schools and communities alike seems to be a step in the right direction for the success of all schools in Niagara and Ontario

References are available on the web version located at: www.brocku.ca/nco