

IN CANADA

Schools, Poverty, and the Achievement Gap

BY BEN LEVIN

LAST June, representatives from more than 20 countries and several international agencies came together under the midnight sun in Trondheim, Norway, to discuss the challenge of creating greater equity in the outcomes of education. This meeting, sponsored by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Norwegian Ministry of Education, was the culmination of several years of work on the theme of "equity in education." The OECD will shortly issue a report titled *No More Failures*, replete with analysis and recommendations on how to improve equity in educational outcomes.

The concern for "raising the bar and closing the gap" in educational outcomes is now widespread around the world. *Kappan* readers will be familiar with the debate on the achievement gap, especially in the context of No Child Left Behind. In Europe, the results of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment — www.pisa.oecd.org) brought the issue into stark relief as well. PISA, a large, carefully designed study now involving more than 40 countries, tests 15-year-olds in reading, science, and mathematics. There have been two rounds of results so far, in 2000 and 2003, with a third due to be released this December.

The findings of PISA have been striking and consistent. Some countries that thought they were doing well educationally found that they had not only poor overall results but also very large gaps between their highest- and lowest-achieving students. In Germany, the phrase "PISA Schock" has come into the language as a sign of how serious the problem is. In contrast, some other countries, such as Finland, Korea, and — yes — Canada, showed very high overall results and much smaller gaps in their achievement distribution.

The reality, in PISA and in every other assessment of student outcomes, is that socioeconomic status remains

the most powerful single influence on students' educational and other life outcomes. This is true in Finland and Canada as well as in the U.S. and everywhere else. Where you are born and grow up matters enormously to what you are able to be and do. A recent study in my home town of Winnipeg, using a database of all children born in the city in 1984, showed that, whereas 89% of all students writing the grade-12 language exam passed, only 12% of students whose families had received social assistance in the previous two years passed the exam.¹ Indeed, a large proportion of this group was either a year or more behind or out of school entirely.

Although the achievement gap in Canada is smaller than in the United States, it is far from trivial. UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre recently released a report with the fascinating title of *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries* (www.unicef-irc.org/publications). Using a rich array of data, it compares the situation of children in Canada, the U.S., the United Kingdom, and 18 other European countries on six dimensions, including material well-being, health and safety, education, peer and family relationships, behaviors and risks, and young people's subjective sense of well-being.

No country ranks high on all six dimensions. The Netherlands gets the best overall score. Canada's average ranking across the six areas is 12th, while the U.S. and the U.K. are at the bottom. And the kicker is that the report concludes: "Variation in government policy appears to account for most of the variation in child poverty levels between OECD countries. No OECD country devoting 10% or more of GDP to social transfers has a child poverty rate higher than 10%. No country devoting less than 5% of GDP to social transfers has a child poverty rate of less than 15%."²

About 15% of Canadian children live in poverty, defined as living in a household with income less than 50% of the national median. What makes the Canadian situation galling is that in 1989 the Parliament of Canada passed a unanimous motion to end child poverty in the country by the year 2000. Surprise! When 2000 rolled around, the child poverty rate was higher than in 1989. In Canadian schools students in special education, recent immigrants, some visible minority groups, and Aboriginal youths lag behind national averages of educational achievement.

All of this makes one skeptical of new pronouncements by governments on their commitment to greater equity. Yet equity in educational outcomes is high on the international policy agenda for powerful reasons. First, it is widely claimed that better educational out-

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comes are essential for national economic and social success, though as Gerald Bracey has pointed out in these pages, the claim is not necessarily well supported by the empirical evidence. In public policy and politics, though, evidence matters only if it affects beliefs, and this does not happen so quickly.

We should not lose faith in evidence entirely, though, because another factor driving the current interest in narrowing the achievement gap is research showing that reduced inequities in income and education are connected to better economic performance. Countries with less inequality in income and education actually show better economic performance, calling into question the long-standing belief that countries face an inevitable choice between equity and efficiency.³

Governments and international agencies are all considering what steps they can take. Some take the view that schools could do much more to reduce, if not eliminate, the effects of poverty. This has led to some very dubious strategies, such as various kinds of takeovers or reconstitution of so-called failing schools, as if the problem were simply one of working a little harder.

Others argue that socioeconomic status is too powerful and that schools alone will not be able to mitigate its impact. Richard Rothstein, another *Kappan* contributor, has made this argument particularly well, including pointing to alternative policy measures that might have more impact on outcomes than some school programs.⁴

For educators working in high-poverty communities, finding an appropriate stance toward poverty and the achievement gap can be difficult. Educators see the daily challenges in the lives of their students, including poor housing, inadequate income, and the effects of discrimination. Schools did not create these problems, and on their own they cannot solve them.

But folks in schools are not always clear on what they can or should do about the problems of poverty and inequality, and the steps we take are not always the best ones.⁵ We know that poor children often get teachers who are less qualified and instruction that is less challenging, when they need the best we can give them. The OECD report *No More Failures* lists such sensible steps as reducing retention in grade, stressing early intervention to address reading problems, reducing early tracking in secondary schools, directing additional resources to the highest-need schools, reaching out more to parents, and managing school choice to make sure it does not exacerbate inequities.

There are some good practices in Canada that address equity issues. First Nations are slowly increasing

their high school graduation rates. British Columbia is working hard to improve outcomes for Aboriginal students in provincial schools, while Alberta has its Initiative for School Improvement, and Quebec has a strategy for student success. Ontario has developed ambitious strategies that are yielding improved literacy and numeracy skills in elementary schools and higher high school graduation rates. Most of these efforts rightly stress working with teachers to improve their ability to support success in diverse student populations.

A Personal Introduction

I am delighted to be able to write the In Canada column for the *Kappan*, a magazine I have read and admired for many years. Heather-jane Robertson's knowledge, intelligence, and writing skills make her a tough act to follow! I thought it would be useful to introduce myself briefly to readers.

Though I now live in Toronto, I was born and have spent most of my life in Winnipeg. My career in education has moved back and forth between government and academe. I have been a civil servant in a department/ministry of education four times, including serving as deputy minister (chief civil servant) in Manitoba from 1999 to 2002 and in Ontario from 2004 to early 2007. In academe, I have been a researcher and professor and currently occupy a Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, which is part of the University of Toronto. I have been a member of PDK since 1984. My three daughters are all graduates of Manitoba public schools.

I hope to write about a broad array of issues from a Canadian perspective while connecting them to the experience of *Kappan* readers in the U.S. and elsewhere. I welcome comments from readers or ideas for content for future columns. I can be reached at blevin@oise.utoronto.ca.

1. Noralou P. Roos et al., "The Complete Story: A Population-Based Perspective on School Performance and Educational Testing," *Canadian Journal of Education*, vol. 29, 2006, pp. 684-705.

2. UNICEF, *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries* (Florence: Innocenti Research Centre, Report Card 7, 2007), p. 7.

3. *World Development Report 2006: Equity and Development* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2005).

4. Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004).

5. Benjamin Levin and J. Anthony Riffel, "Current and Potential School System Responses to Poverty," *Canadian Public Policy*, vol. 26, 2000, pp. 183-96. ◀



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