

More than a free lunch: The effects of poverty on education outcomes

Readiness to learn and academic success

Poverty and income inequality are major barriers to academic achievement. As daily mentors in the lives of their students, teachers experience the impact poverty has on the children in their care. The impact of poverty goes beyond material deprivation; it contributes to social isolation.

- Stats Canada in a study conducted in the fall of 2006 wrote, “In analyzing five-year-old children’s readiness to learn on the basis of gender, level of household income, and a child’s home environment, children from lower-income families were less ready to learn than children from affluent households.”
- Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to have low earnings as adults.
- Working poverty rates were highest, 9.1%, for adults with less than secondary school education—a rate that dropped to 6.1% with secondary school completion.
- The highest educated individuals had the lowest working poverty rates—post-secondary 4.8% and university 3.2% .
- Poor school performances in childhood can set the stage for negative outcomes in adulthood, including low incomes, poor health, and a shorter life expectancy.
- According to “Lost in the Shuffle,” a Toronto study on the impact of homelessness on children’s education found that the majority of homeless children aged 6 to 12 attend three schools in a year and as a result, repeat material and miss curriculum. Highly transient students can attend more than 10 schools before reaching secondary school.
- Academic and behaviour problems can indicate impending failure: delay in language development, delay in reading, aggression, violence, social withdrawal, irregular attendance, and depression.
- Students may not be able to concentrate or focus at school and may be unwilling to interact with peers or adults at school in an effective manner.
- Students’ motivation to learn, emotional security, and self esteem may all be negatively impacted. Poor students report feeling alienated, inadequate, and depressed.
- The PISA(OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment) results show that lower socio-economic status students are more likely to have inadequate literary skills than students from more privileged families—a student in the lowest 5% of family income is likely to be more than 1 1/2 literacy levels behind students in the highest 5% of family income.

Being poor is...

“Feeling shamed when my dad can’t get a job.”

“Pretending that you forgot your lunch.”

“Being afraid to tell your Mom you need gym shoes.”

– Grade 4 and 5 students

Children in families without permanent homes face learning challenges

As long as governments allow family homelessness to continue, it is necessary to understand the educational experience of homeless children and put in place the supports they need for educational success.

- Children of highly mobile families face trauma and dislocation.
- In the March 15, 2007, count of total homeless in Vancouver, 74 were children—52 were considered ‘sheltered homeless’ (in

shelters or transition homes). The rest were among the street homeless.

- Parents report problems finding a quiet place in shelter for their children to do homework. Many of these children have experienced or witnessed violence that can cause behaviour that interferes with learning.
- According to a national survey, 76% of women and 88% of children in shelters were escaping situations of abuse.

Being poor is...

“Not getting to go on school trips.”

“Not buying books at the book fair.”

– Grade 4 and 5 students

What would help poor children succeed in school?

- Support for families to assist them in providing positive parental interaction such as reading aloud and participating in community sports and activities.
- Publically funded, not-for-profit childcare system that includes the principles of equality, universality, accessibility, developmental programming, and inclusivity.
- Programs for increasing educational outcomes for children who are already behind peers when they start school.
- Jobs with living wages and benefits for working parents and providing adequate welfare rates for adults who are not in the paid workforce.
- Affordable rental, market, and co-operative housing.
- Fully funded all-day Kindergarten for all children.
- Support for students with unique learning needs integrated into the regular classroom.
- Increased support for specialist teachers like counsellors and learning assistance teachers.

