

Advocacy

Eliminating poverty through lifelong learning

By Anne McDonagh

The single mother on welfare feeding her kids Kraft dinner for the last week of the month; the university student working two jobs, attending class and going rapidly into debt; the unskilled worker earning just above minimum wage, unable to afford training to get a better job; parents working two and three jobs to support their families with little time to provide quality parenting; the immigrant whose dreams have been dashed because no employer will accept his credentials; the constant worry about surviving until the next pay check. These are the faces of poverty in our community.

Poverty reveals itself also in the ghettos of deprivation throughout our city and in increasing and crime as young people lose hope of ever “making it.” Poverty is evident in the litter and squalor of our streets as people give up on one another and no longer feel part of their community.

Increased gap between rich and poor

For the last ten years or so, until the current recession, Canada experienced one of the most prosperous economic times ever. But according to the recent census, despite this prosperity, the poorest 20 per cent among us have seen their incomes drop by 20 per cent. The wealthiest have increased their incomes by 16 percent while the incomes of the middle class have stagnated. Child poverty today is the same as it was in 1989—nearly 12 percent—the year when all political parties in Ottawa vowed to end child poverty by the year 2000! More people are using food banks than ever before. And the plight of immigrants has become an ever steeper uphill battle. Despite being the best educated immigrants ever to come to Canada, many are among the poorest of us.

More than ever, for our country to survive and prosper, we need everyone to contribute their labour, creativity and knowledge in order to compete globally and to deal with the employment issues around an aging population. Yet we are wasting the productivity of one-fifth of our society. Tolerating this level of poverty amid our affluence is morally wrong and bad economics. Just as individual lives are stunted by poverty so too is Canadian society.

A war on poverty

The Ontario government has launched a campaign to reduce child poverty by twenty-five percent in five years. Apparently a recession provides a good opportunity to make inroads into systemic poverty, and alleviating child poverty is certainly well-meaning; however, children are living in poverty because their parents are as well. It is hard to grasp how children can be lifted out of poverty if their parents are not.

People living in poverty need to earn more money. Society's job is to eliminate the barriers that prevent them from earning enough to live on. To enable families currently living in poverty to succeed economically would require the government to tackle some of those barriers. The government must:

- Raise the minimum wage—or provide wage subsidies—to the level where a person who works full time does not need to use a food bank.**
- Provide affordable housing. Having a roof over your head and decent living conditions should be a right not a privilege.**
- Create a universal, affordable daycare program that would allow both parents to work. The current child care benefit, at \$100 a month, cannot begin to cover the current costs of daycare and makes no real difference in helping a family to get out of poverty.**
- Raise taxes on the wealthy to help pay for some of these services. Tax cutting depletes the government coffers and thus prevents society from looking after its citizens and increases the gap between the rich and the poor. The neo-conservative agenda—tax cuts and unregulated free market supremacy—has proven itself to be a colossal and costly failure.**
- Provide real opportunities for everyone to get some kind of solid and affordable post secondary training or education whether it be university, college or apprenticeship.**

Education conquers poverty

Education has always been the most reliable path out of poverty. For example, in development work around the world, it is accepted that the fastest and best way to tackle poverty is education particularly the education of women.

The complexity of today's world makes education and training more important than ever. Globalization and technology require a highly

trained work force. The aging population means that everyone of working age must contribute to the economy if we are to be competitive in the world.

One way to defeat poverty and to use the potential of all Canadians is to make sure lifelong learning is comprehensive, affordable and available to everyone.

Currently, we pay lip service to lifelong learning, but do we know what it means? The word “lifelong” means from birth to death. We now provide free, universal education from kindergarten to grade 12. But what happens before kindergarten and after grade 12?

We view child care in the first few years of a child’s life as a private arrangement totally up to the wishes and finances of parents, and we consider post secondary education as a choice for those who can afford it or who are willing to make the sacrifices necessary to get it. After all, they benefit by getting better jobs and higher salaries. But society benefits far more and would benefit even more if all children were exposed to early childhood education and more people, both young and old, were able to participate in post secondary education. And it would be possible if as a society we were dedicated to lifelong learning.

International bodies, like the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), recognize that creating a lifelong learning society begins with young children and continues long after adolescence. Lifelong learning is a seamless process from early childhood development to kindergarten to grade 12 to post secondary education to adult learning. A 2004 report from the OECD tells us that “investment in early childhood education is of key importance to build a strong foundation for lifelong learning and to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities later in school.”

The earliest years

Canada does not measure up well compared to other affluent countries when it comes to the beginning years. Just last month, a report by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy, found that “when it comes to the quality of early child education and care in the world’s most affluent countries, Canada is tied for last place with Ireland”...that “Canada met only one of 10 benchmarks

setting minimum standards for protecting the rights of children...behind both its North American counterparts, Mexico and the United States.”

Dr. Fraser Mustard, a world-renowned researcher in and advocate for early years' education, claims that how well young children develop intellectually is the foundation of a society's prosperity, as well as the basis of the child's future academic performance. He says that by the time children get to first grade, it may be too late to help those who have already fallen behind. So much for our efforts to create a learning society at the beginning of people's lives.

Post secondary learning

Surely we are doing better after grade 12, aren't we? Paradoxically, while our politicians and the business elite pay lip service to lifelong learning, and we are urged to get more education and training, post secondary learning has become increasingly out of reach financially for many of the middle class and certainly for the poor. Their children know that they cannot aspire to a post secondary education long before they leave high school, and that awareness negatively influences their educational choices and their attitude to education. People willing to make the sacrifice of going to post secondary institutions are likely to leave with a crippling debt they will be paying off for decades. Clearly some reform is necessary to the cost of post secondary education.

Adult learning

How are we doing with adult learning after the post secondary period? In our society, lifelong learning is often understood to mean adult or continuing education, that is, courses one takes from time to time as an adult for reasons related to work or simply for fun. Or it is government-sponsored training for the unemployed. Thus, it is those who already have an education or training who can take advantage of the learning opportunities our society offers adults. “Them that has, gits.” The poor are trapped in their economic situation because they cannot afford to take courses that would help them get better jobs, even if they had time off from their two or three minimum wage jobs, even if the training were available.

While it is better to have some adult education courses and training programs available than none at all, this model of unplanned adult learning is inefficient and inadequate. It is a grab bag of individual

programs and services offered by many different institutions that seem not to communicate with one another. There is no organizing body that might put some order on this chaos. This is not news to the thousands of adults, trying to get training or education, who have struggled through the mish-mash of courses that pretends to be an adult education system.

We really aren't doing too well before and after K to 12.

In many countries in Europe, children go to kindergarten or pre-school of some sort at three years of age whether parents work or not. The cost of post secondary education is dramatically less than in Canada because the government provides much of the funding. These countries also deliver a smorgasbord of learning opportunities for their adult citizens. The government and the unions work together on some of these programs, and many unions provide education counsellors for their members. Significantly, the gap between the rich and the poor in those countries is not nearly as wide as it is in Canada.

The potential of lifelong learning

Although lifelong learning addresses the issue of poverty, it is much more than that. An over-arching benefit of lifelong learning is a well-educated citizenry. In order to maintain our democracy, we need people who understand and value human and civil rights, the benefits and responsibilities of living in a free and open society, the obligation to seek social justice and the necessity to look after the environment. Lifelong learning provides the opportunity for all of us to be well-informed and to think critically.

Education is also an end in itself in that it enhances our lives immeasurably. We don't have to be wealthy to experience its benefits, but when poverty rules out opportunities for some to improve their lives through education, we all lose.

We need a coherent system of lifelong learning so that we all can easily and affordably learn and keep on learning what we need to learn initially as pre-schoolers and throughout our lives in order to become and remain competent workers, good citizens and fulfilled human beings.

An investment in this vision of lifelong learning would be a formidable enemy of poverty and would enrich life for us all:

- **Children entering kindergarten at age four or five would be ready to learn;**
- **Fewer young people would drop out of school;**
- **When they finished secondary school, graduates would be prepared to and able to continue learning;**
- **Laid off workers would be able to take advantage of the opportunity to retrain;**
- **As educated citizens, we would be less at the mercy of unscrupulous politicians and the manipulations of the media;**
- **Seniors would find the habit of lifelong learning hard to break;**
- **We would be able to fulfill our dreams regardless of family background;**
- **Finally, our society would be more prosperous and better able to compete with the rest of the world.**

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