

# **Poverty and Education: Towards Effective Action A Review of the Literature**

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Prepared by  
Joseph J. Flessa  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,  
University of Toronto

For  
Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario  
Suite 1000, 480 University Avenue  
Toronto, Ontario M5G 1V2  
[www.etfo.ca](http://www.etfo.ca)

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## **Executive Summary**

The literature on poverty and schooling is expansive yet can reasonably be understood as an attempt to grapple with the same core questions from different perspectives: Where does the inequality in educational outcomes (however measured) associated with children affected by poverty originate and, correspondingly, what can be done about it? The main question in the literature is not **whether** there are differences in educational outcomes according to a student's family income or socioeconomic status (SES). It is not, in other words, a surprise to learn that all traditional measures of school success systematically rank students from poor families lower than their wealthier peers. The weight of the literature in this area examines **how large** those differences are, what influences best explain the gap between poor students and other students, and what reforms shrink that gap.

The purpose of this review of the literature is to foreground many of the **taken for granted assumptions** about poverty and schooling as well as to point out **what's left out** of most discussions of the topic. **This literature review is designed to provide a foundation for educators to assess the relationship between poverty and schooling in order to take effective action.** The target audience is concerned readers who need not only empirical data to answer questions about poverty and schooling but also the opportunity to reflect on persistent dilemmas in the field so that they can develop more effective remedies that are specific to their own contexts. This review of the literature takes some initial steps towards building a conceptual framework that could inform teachers' professional development. The issues described are linked to different levels of analysis and imply different types of policy intervention.

The review is organized according to two main questions:

1. Since the time of the Coleman report (1966), researchers have argued that outside-of-school influences, especially the family, have a greater impact on student achievement outcomes than any other variable. Poverty is not caused by schools; it originates outside school walls (macro level). So what can we reasonably expect schools or classrooms to do to address it (micro level)? This is often described as the **macro/micro debate**.
2. When we describe what is or should be “different” about schooling for children affected by poverty, we are using an unstated point of comparison, one that not only draws attention to inequalities but also might reinforce deficit conceptualizations of students and communities. **Do we look at children and see what’s there, or do we look at children and see what’s missing?**

To shed light on the first question, the literature review examines the macro/micro tension from a variety of perspectives. To help us better understand how much schools can do, this review examines recent research on neighbourhood effects on schooling outcomes, as well as the impact of early childhood and postsecondary educational opportunities. The conclusion of much of this literature is that in order to fix schools we must fix society first. This viewpoint has been critiqued, however, by “Effective Schools” research. The review examines this rebuttal and its focus on highly successful high-poverty schools.

Answering the second question requires close examination of the deficit frameworks built into many of the policy recommendations that deal with poverty and schooling. In particular, the popular work of Ruby Payne is examined and critiqued for its

unsubstantiated stereotypes of communities, families, and learners experiencing poverty. This section of the literature review raises questions about **how best to target educational interventions in schools for children experiencing poverty without simultaneously blaming students or their families for their poverty or finding them to be lacking in abilities.**

The literature review concludes with an overview of the “story” told by researchers and practitioners about the relationship between poverty and schooling. The ways that we shape policy and practice responses depend at least in part on the “policy narrative” we construct to simplify and explain a complicated and vast web of interrelated causes, correlations, and effects. There are two significant components to include in any policy narrative developed from this literature review. **First, a focus on either/or problems and either/or solutions is not just incomplete but also harmful.** The weight of the literature is unambiguous in its major findings from the macro and micro level. From the macro: The results of schooling are determined in large part by preconditions over which schools have no control, like family SES. And from the micro: Some schools do far better than others in resisting this deterministic relationship, through a combination of curricular and human resource investments. To talk about one aspect of the relationship between poverty and schooling without at the same time talking about the other contributes to two false ideas: first, that schools can do nothing and, secondly, that schools can do everything. This is the macro/micro tension. **The challenge, therefore, is to tell a consistent story about the importance of school initiatives in the context of other mutually supportive social policies.**

Another succinct conclusion of this review is that deficit frameworks describing children living in poverty shape policy and practice. These frameworks must consistently be identified and rebutted because, among other reasons, **deficit frameworks themselves make it impossible to envision education as a collective endeavour.** Schools and communities have necessarily different roles in rearing and educating children. But when these roles are considered complementary and not adversarial, schools function better. In order for the roles to be considered complementary, communities cannot be described by educators only according to what they lack and how they fail. **When educators articulate a more comprehensive version of what it means to work with communities in poverty, we accomplish something quite significant: we take a stand against the sometimes overwhelming public discourse that blames poor people for their poverty and that excuses unacceptable degrees of educational inequality.**

## **Overview**

The literature on poverty and schooling is broad. It spans many different levels of analysis: from micro to macro; from studies of individual learners to recommendations of national economic policy; from examinations of classroom curriculum to critiques of schoolwide academic streaming; from analyses of the influence of the family to arguments about the neighbourhood's contribution to the quality of its schools or to students' academic readiness. The literature includes statistical/quantitative analyses, interpretive/qualitative empirical work, and critical theoretical interrogations of terms (such as "at risk") and assumptions. It is expansive yet can reasonably be understood as an attempt to grapple with the same core questions from different perspectives: Where does the inequality in educational outcomes (however measured) associated with children affected by poverty originate and, correspondingly, what can be done about it?

The main question in the literature is not whether there are differences according to a student's family income or socioeconomic status (SES). It is not, in other words, a surprise to any researcher or reader of this literature to learn that students from poor families systematically rank lower than their wealthier peers on all traditional measures of school success. The weight of the literature in this area of study examines how large those differences are, what influences best explain the gap between poor students and other students, and what reforms do the most to shrink that gap. Some scholars, especially those associated with the Effective Schools movement, argue that this focus on school and student failure is itself part of the problem, akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy that normalizes patterns of underachievement so that they become taken for

granted, are perceived as inevitable, and underestimate the impact that good schooling can have.

The purpose of this review of the literature is to foreground many of these taken for granted assumptions about poverty and schooling, as well as to point out what's left out of most discussions of the topic. Built into this literature are not only empirical facts (low-SES kids rank lower on EQAO tests, for example) but also implied causal relationships (that poverty-influenced effects on child development or poor parenting or low teacher expectations cause these rankings), as well as normative expectations about what schools or families or teachers or policy-makers should but don't do. This literature review is designed to provide a foundation on which an informed and engaged reader can assess the relationship between poverty and schooling in order to take effective action. The review is organized according to two main questions:

3. Since the time of the Coleman report (Coleman et al., 1966), researchers have argued that outside-of-school influences, especially the family, have a greater impact on student achievement outcomes than any other variable. Poverty is not caused by schools, it originates outside school walls. So what can we reasonably expect schools or classrooms to do to address it?
4. When we describe what is or should be "different" about schooling for children affected by poverty, we are using an unstated point of comparison, one that not only draws attention to inequalities but also might reinforce "deficit" conceptualizations of students and communities. Do we look at children and see what's there, or do we look at children and see what's missing?

The target audience for this paper are concerned readers who need not only empirical data to answer questions about poverty and schooling but also the opportunity to reflect on persistent dilemmas in the field in order to develop more effective remedies specific to their own contexts. This review of literature takes some initial steps towards building a conceptual framework that could inform teachers' professional development. The issues described in the sections that follow are linked to different levels of analysis and

imply different types of policy intervention. It may be useful for readers to ask themselves where they as teachers situate themselves within this framework.

A word on the selection criteria for the literature included here: this review is not intended to serve as a meta-analysis of the existing empirical research on the relationship between poverty and schooling. I did not assemble all of the existing studies into one database in order to reach one conclusion, nor did I seek to establish agreement on current empirical “facts” or to define what was state-of-the-art in measurement. Because this paper intentionally foregrounds disagreements rather than agreements in order to provide readers with a greater understanding of the landscape of policy and practice debates regarding poverty and schooling, I selected works according to their appropriateness to the organizing questions, their suitability for illustrating certain lines of thought in the literature, and their prevalence in the discourse on this topic. Works cited include peer-reviewed research articles, empirical policy studies, historical work from the social sciences, and applied work written for professional audiences; context on these works is provided in the text and a full list of References accompanies this review.

## **Part I: Examining the Macro/Micro Tension: How Much Can Schools Do?**

Historically, public schools have been supported, at least in part, by people’s faith in them as a vehicle of social mobility, the institutions through which children gain equal access to the knowledge, skills, and connections that will enable them to move higher up the economic ladder than their parents. The Coleman report (Coleman et al., 1966) called this belief into question. It examined the relationship between school resources,

outside-of-school influences, and student achievement and concluded that family background explained most of the variation in school achievement. This conclusion was subsequently distorted to mean that schools don't matter. Later, Bowles and Gintis (1976) concluded that schools *do* matter, but in the negative. Schools, according to their conclusions, are the vehicle through which social inequalities are maintained, not disrupted; schools are a crucial mechanism for systematically reproducing social advantage for the advantaged and social disadvantage for the disadvantaged. More recent work on intergenerational inequality raises a crucial question for those concerned with poverty and schooling: Is social mobility real? Given that “there are quite strong tendencies for children of those at the bottom of the income distribution to find their children at the bottom, with a parallel tendency for those at the top of the income distribution to find their children also at the top” (Bowles, Gintis, and Groves, 2005, p. 1), or said another way, if “the apple falls even closer to the tree than we thought,” (Mazumder, 2005), how should we interpret the faith placed in schools to give children of all backgrounds a fair chance?

There are many ways to respond to this body of work. The first is empirical: the Coleman report has been critiqued for errors in its methodology (see Viadero, 2006, for a summary), as well as for the way in which it overgeneralizes (and therefore underestimates) school effects. Not all schools for poor children are equally bad, nor are all poor students' achievement levels equally low, which means that some schools have demonstrably positive effects on learning outcomes. “During the 1970s and 1980s,” one report notes, “advances in educational measurement, research design, and statistical modeling enabled researchers to claim conclusively that schools do indeed

differ significantly in their effect on children’s outcomes” (Frempong and Willms, 2002, pp. 277-78, citing Raudenbush and Willms, 1991). The important thing to learn, then, would be what schools with greater effects are doing and what policy supports (funding, staffing, curriculum, etc.) would make it possible to create more such schools. This goal is associated with the research on Effective Schools, which is explained in more detail later in this review.

Another way to respond to the deterministic conclusions of some quantitative studies is to ask, Just what is it about poverty that causes certain schooling outcomes? Many discussions about poverty and schooling construct a two-link causal chain — poverty causes *X* — leaving out the intermediate steps that might be amenable to proactive public policies and other targeted interventions. The conclusion that “poverty causes low reading scores,” leaves little space for teachers or policy-makers to respond. A more detailed explanation with more links in the chain might identify several areas where public policy and educators’ work might exert meaningful influence. For example, one might link poverty to lack of employment opportunities that pay a living wage, in turn to a family’s need to move frequently, in turn to inconsistent school attendance, in turn to low reading scores; or one might link poverty to economically segregated neighbourhoods to low school quality to novice teachers to low reading scores. It is worth noting that the “chain” metaphor may itself be fundamentally flawed, and that an image of a policy “web” might be more useful. The overall point, however, remains the same: typically the relationship between poverty and schooling is discussed in simplistic ways that discourage accurate analysis of policy-amenable problems.

### ***The Importance of Neighbourhood***

One body of research that adds more links to the causal chain are the studies that show how important neighbourhood is in affecting school outcomes. For example, in Canada Kohen, Hertzman, and Brooks-Gunn (1999) have studied “neighbourhood influence and school readiness.” The study of neighbourhood effects derives from the theoretical perspective that “persistence in economic status is generated by group-level influences on individuals. What distinguishes this theory from other explanations of poverty is its emphasis on the role of social as opposed to individual-level characteristics” (Durlauf, 2006, p. 142). The shift from individual-level analyses to those that focus on “group membership” has important implications “both in terms of understanding the sources of poverty and inequality, as well as in terms of the design of public policies” (Durlauf, 2006, p. 142).

The Gautreaux program in the United States is one example of a policy remedy focused on the importance of neighbourhood context and the socializing influence of group membership (see Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000). Gautreaux was an initiative whereby a subset of Black residents of racially isolated public housing in Chicago were relocated to more racially and economically diverse areas. The purpose of the policy was to provide residential choice in order to disrupt the pattern of intergenerational transmission of poverty. Positive schooling results among children in the Gautreaux families, such as lower high school dropout rates, were interpreted as having loosened the negative relationship between poverty and schooling.

Subsequent research on a different housing choice program in the U.S., conducted by Ludwig, Ladd, and Duncan (2001), asked, “Why do high-poverty urban areas have such problems with schooling outcomes?” (p.147). This research went on to examine the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program in Baltimore. Unlike Gautreaux, MTO relied on an experimental design whereby low-income families living in either public or Section 8 (rent-assisted) housing who volunteered for the program were randomly provided with different interventions. As described by Ludwig, Ladd, and Duncan (2001), “The experimental group were offered Section 8 rental subsidies that could be used only for private-market housing in census tracts with very low-poverty rates. These families also received counseling services. The Section 8-only comparison groups were also offered rental subsidies but were not required to move to a low-poverty census tract and were not provided with any additional services. Members of the control group received no rental subsidies” (p.149). Elementary schoolchildren in the experimental group did better in both reading and math than their peers in the control group.

What explains the positive effects of MTO? What is the mechanism that initiated the more positive schooling outcomes for students whose families moved? Are the positive outcomes due mostly to the destination (that is, better neighbourhood = better school); to the simple fact of movement (the powerful suggestion to poor families that there are alternatives to their current living situations might lead to a more positive outlook on schooling’s potential benefits); to the fact that different neighbourhoods have different “norms” for schooling (better neighbourhoods have different social processes, like greater belief in and therefore effort in schooling, that socialize newcomers in ways

that lead to better schooling outcomes); or to some combination of these factors?

These questions derive not only from measurement issues in the study — missing school records and standardized test score data for students affected by the program as well as questions (not raised by these authors, but by others) regarding the fairness of standardized tests as appropriate measures of learning — but also from a more fundamental difficulty in establishing causality when so many “variables” are clearly at play.

And how should a reader apply the lessons from U.S.-based research to Ontario? Toronto is not Baltimore; the patterns of racial and economic segregation here are far less rigid, and schools in the poorest Toronto neighbourhoods are not nearly so desperate as schools in the poorest neighbourhoods in Baltimore. Might “neighbourhood effects” matter less in Canada than in the United States? Perhaps, but mattering less is not the same as not mattering at all. And given worries about growing racial and economic segregation in Toronto, might those neighbourhood effects be growing in importance, and in negative ways? (See Chung, 2005; Jackson, Schetagne, & Smith, 2001; Kohen, Hertzman, & Brooks-Gunn, 1999.) If Willms is correct — he “argues that childhood vulnerability arises not from poverty but from the environments in which children are raised” (quoted in Canadian Council on Learning, p. 17) — what role if any do schools and educators play in making those environments more positive than negative?

### ***Issues in Studying the Macro/Micro Relationship***

What other issues are related to the macro/micro dilemma of studying the relationship between poverty and schooling? First, “Canada has no official poverty line and there is no general agreement in Canada on what constitutes poverty” (Hunter, 2003, p. 31, referencing Fellegi, 1997). Second, attempts to determine the relationship between poverty, schooling resources, and outcomes — asking what kinds of resources besides funding would prompt more equitable outcomes — are not only politically contentious but also methodologically problematic. Grubb (2006b) notes that “extending conceptions of equity beyond funding requires better understanding about what the targets of equity efforts should be. This in turn requires better understanding the translation of revenues into those resources in schools that might matter to the results of schooling, themselves enormously varied. But this process remains a subject of great dispute, even after years of research” (p. 4). Third, the prevalence and accessibility of U.S.-based research for Canadian researchers and policy-makers may be standing in the way of the development of a “comprehensive model of educational indicators that specifies key factors influencing learning outcomes and promotes theory-based analysis, but is sensitive to the Canadian context” (Schulz, Clark, & Crocker, 2006, p. 55). In other words, many of the conclusions about the relationship between poverty and schooling are drawn from other contexts, and a specifically Canadian framework to explain how poverty and schooling are interrelated may be missing.

### ***Attention to Early Childhood Education and Postsecondary Opportunities***

There seems to be a growing trend in the literature on poverty and schooling to emphasize opposite ends of the education timeline. There is a great deal of policy research and advocacy regarding early childhood education (preschool) and childcare on the one hand (see, for example, Campaign 2000, 2005), and vocational training and postsecondary opportunities on the other (see, for example, Polakow, Butler, Deprez, & Kahn, 2004). The contemporary policy environment seems to place less explicit emphasis on K-12 schools than it does on preconditions for and next steps after traditional schooling. This emphasis on early childhood education is connected to a focus in the literature on the “social problems” associated with poverty (see, for example, “Children and Their Development, pp. 38-40, Tepperman & Curtis, 2004) and with questions regarding just when inequality in educational outcomes begins (see Lee and Burkham, 2002). “Test scores of more and less advantaged preschoolers show wide gaps before the children even enter school. Some intensive, high-quality early education programs have substantially narrowed these gaps and led to impressive long-term results, such as increased rates of high school graduation and college attendance among participating children” (Sawhill, 2006, p. 4). Sawhill continues: “The most important ingredients for success appear to be intervening as early as possible and maintaining the quality of what is offered as more children are served” (p. 4), thereby expressing a clear direction for policy-makers: get poor children out of the home and into educational settings early. O’Connor and Fernandez (2006) would label this perspective the “Theory of Compromised Human Development “ and would note that

the reliance on developmental testing and special education labelling of students affected by poverty is itself what manufactures inequitable schooling outcomes. They argue that “it is the normative culture of the school that places poor children at risk by privileging the developmental expressions more likely to be nurtured among white middle-class children. In the process, the developmental expressions that are more likely to be nurtured among poor minority youth are marginalized and are positioned to produce low achievement” (pp. 8-9). Therefore, they conclude, “it is schools and not poverty that place minority students at heightened risk for special-education placement” (p. 10).

### ***How Can We Know Which Policies Might Have an Impact? Should We Go Macro or Micro?***

It is important to note that not all of the news from the macro level is equally discouraging. Sirin (2005) found that the correlation between socioeconomic status and educational achievement is strong, but is also slightly less correlated than in the past. Willms (2006) conducted an international comparison of the impact of socioeconomic level on students’ reading literacy skills. Using the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) data and Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) data, the author reached several policy-amenable conclusions:

1. When the variance in achievement is greatest within schools, curricular interventions are called for but when the variance is greatest between schools, efforts to reduce socioeconomic segregation are warranted (p. 40);
2. “The schooling systems that have the best results — meaning high and equitable student performance — with very few exceptions have low levels of between-school segregation” (p. 50);
3. “Schools with a heterogeneous intake of students, in terms of SES, have equally high performance as those with a homogenous intake” (p. 68) and there’s little reason to conclude that academic streaming would effectively raise achievement levels (p. 53);

4. Schools differ in their “added value” in part because of school culture variables like teacher morale and collaboration (p. 68). (School climate and culture are discussed later in this review.);
5. “The most important factors explaining reading performance in PIRLS were teacher experience, the disciplinary climate of the classroom, and parental support. In PISA they were student-to-staff teaching ratio, the proportion of teachers with tertiary-level qualifications, students’ use of resources, teacher morale and commitment, the disciplinary climate of the classroom and teacher-student relations. The results do not support the popular belief that smaller class sizes, or lower teacher-student ratios, yield better results.” (p. 68)

A recent U.S. study by Grubb (2006a) utilized the National Educational Longitudinal Survey of the Class of 1988 (NELS88) to study the relationship between family background and schooling outcomes. This data set “followed eighth graders in 1988 through high school and afterwards, [and] includes questionnaires to students and parents as well as teachers and administrators” (p. 6). This data allowed Grubb to construct “25 different outcome measures, including test scores, attitudes and values (like educational aspirations), and progress through high school (like credits accumulated, graduation, and progression to college)” (p. 6). The most powerful effects seen in his study were the impact of maternal education level and parental aspirations for children. Also, “changing schools is clearly detrimental” (p. 8), though it affects “progress through high school but not test scores” (p. 12), which means that relying solely on test scores might have the effect of concealing other negative educational outcomes associated with the experiences of families affected by poverty. Grubb (2006a) concludes that schools may indeed matter but that policy narratives that focus solely on school-based investments in educational outcomes perpetuate inequality.

While schools can be reconstructed to do a much better job with low-performing students — as some of the positive evaluations of whole-school reforms illustrate — it’s unclear that schooling by itself has the power to close the various achievement and educational ‘gaps’ associated with race and class. Those students who are least well prepared for formal schooling by their parents are

enrolled in the least effective schools, rather than the most effective schools that equity would require. (p. 29)

In this way Grubb is similar to Anyon (2005), who concludes:

Policies to counter devastating effects of macro-economic and regional mandates and practices should “count” as policies we call on to create equity and quality in urban districts and schools. As education policy-makers and practitioners, we can acknowledge and act on the power of urban poverty, low-wage work, and housing segregation to dwarf most curricular, pedagogical, and other educational reforms. The effects of macroeconomic policies continually trump the effects of education policies. (p. 83)

Grubb and Anyon suggest that the policy conversation about how to ameliorate the effects of poverty on schooling outcomes need not be either/or. Organizational theory also offers one way out of the all-or-nothing logic of the macro/micro debate. A pervasive image of the school among policy-makers is of an organization that has rigid boundaries around it, an organization that has the ability and the resources on its own to control its purposes and outcomes. However, if we were to stop thinking of the school as a self-contained machine, “a closed system separate from its environment and encompassing a set of stable and easily identified participants” (Scott, 1998, p. 27), and we were instead to recognize schools as open systems, the idea that educational outcomes are shaped both within schools and without would seem straightforward. A definition of “open system” could help remind policy-makers that a school and its environment are always inevitably intertwined. So, particularly with the issue of poverty and schooling, policies that seek to ameliorate current conditions must be at least two-pronged, focusing on the school but also on what lies outside its walls. “Organizations are systems of interdependent activities linked to shifting coalitions of participants; the systems are embedded in — dependent on continuing exchanges with and constituted by — the environments in which they operate” (Scott, 1998, p. 28). This perspective

suggests that policy-makers interested in ameliorating the effects of poverty on schooling outcomes would do well to consider both outside-of-school remedies (for example, by addressing material conditions of families experiencing poverty or by establishing incentives that enable neighbourhoods to cohere safely and heterogeneously) and within-school remedies.

### ***The “Effective Schools” Rebuttal: Pedagogical Responses to Structural Problems***

In contrast to what Anyon or Grubb would recommend, the Effective Schools literature focuses solely on within-school remedies. Jordan (2006) reviewed the Canadian literature on “at risk” students and concluded that “there is a strong relationship between poverty and failure to graduate, and between poverty and all preceding school milestones” (p. 2). She also concluded that “children raised in caring environments with rich opportunities to learn do succeed, regardless of their socio-economic status” (p. 2). It is worth disentangling these two conclusions about success — caring environments and rich opportunities to learn — because they are separate areas of concern and imply different, if complementary, responsibilities. Assumptions about how families affected by poverty raise their children run throughout this literature, and are addressed more fully in the final section of this literature review. A discussion of “rich opportunities to learn” fits well in this section. What are “rich opportunities to learn,” how could policy support the development of more of them, and what school-based responses have shown the most promise?

The Effective Schools literature provides a coherent set of answers to this question. In part as a rebuttal to the Coleman report, Edmonds (1979) and others

(Lightfoot, 1983 ; Clark et al., 1984; Carter, 1999; Conchas, 2006; Williams et al, 2005) have focused on “successful schools” as a way of identifying the school-based organizational and pedagogical properties that seemed to break the pattern of low achievement for poor students. Taylor (2002) states that the correlates of effective schools were “discovered” by Ronald Edmonds and John Frederickson in 1979, but that there are now “seven newer, more broadly based correlates.” According to Taylor, these correlates are: “clearly stated and focused school mission; safe and orderly climate for learning; high expectations for students, teachers, and administrators; opportunity to learn and student time-on-task; instructional leadership by all administrators and staff members; frequent monitoring of student progress; and positive home/school relations” (p. 377).

This literature has been particularly influential among policy-makers and educational administrators, in part for its emphasis on a “strong” principal, on high expectations, and on increased effort among school professionals — what some authors call a “no excuses” or “no shortcuts” approach (Carter, 1999; see Rothstein, 2004, for a critique of Thernstrom, 2003, and Esquith, 2004). Effective Schools approaches argue that schools can alter the patterns associated with poverty and schooling outcomes if only the adults in the school have the correct “belief system” (Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2002, p. 131). Specifically, this belief system is referred to as the “no excuses/it’s my job belief” (Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2002, pp. 131-146). “This ‘approach’ is simply a belief that educators must do anything and everything to see to it that very last child achieves at a high level” (p. 132), these authors argue.

“They did not try to place blame or to find excuses for student failure. They looked for solutions” (p. 146).

This line of analysis in the poverty/schooling literature emphasizes school- and classroom-based remedies and resists the deterministic implications of the more macro research. For example, the executive summary of one report on high-performing high-poverty schools stated, “There are enough schools that defy the trend to prove that the background of the student body does not have to determine achievement results” (Kannapel & Clements, 2002, p. 2). It is also a body of literature that relies on a “best practices” logic, meaning that there are discrete skills and behaviours that can be identified, isolated, and replicated across schools, and that doing so will be both effective and efficient. “It is hoped that the lessons from these exceptional schools will be helpful for other educators who face similar challenges” (Kannapel & Clements, 2002). As one recent analysis of Ontario EQAO results argues, “Since family background evidently is not the only determinant of school achievement, we need to discover why schools with similar socio-economic characteristics perform differently on tests year after year” (Johnson, 2005, p. 8). (For work that advocates several “best practices” aligned with a conservative political agenda, including school choice, on the basis of these contribute to “educational productivity,” see Walberg, 2006).

### ***Staffing of Schools***

One response to the impact of poverty on educational outcomes is to advocate for more effective recruitment, selection, preparation, and placement of teachers for schools affected by poverty. For example, Darling-Hammond (1997) has studied the

relationship between teacher preparation and student outcomes, finding both that rigorously prepared teachers gain better results from their students, and that poor and minority youth in the United States are systematically denied access to such teachers. Darling-Hammond (2002) has also argued that teacher education programs can teach and support prospective teachers to become “agents of social change” (p. 6), able to acknowledge and address differences in the classroom. Education research and policy-making are not uniform in the faith they place in teacher preparation, however. Teacher education programs are routinely criticized for their low standards and weak curriculum (Levine, 2006). Likewise, critics of the credentialing system argue that the process is mostly bureaucratic, that it shuts out potentially effective teachers interested in a mid-career change, and that the standards for entry into the profession are low.

### ***Curriculum of Schools***

Another response to the impact of poverty on educational outcomes is to focus on school curriculum. Particularly at the elementary school level, in the current accountability environment (especially prevalent in the United States), this response has taken the form of a focus on phonics-based literacy and off-the-shelf products like Open Court. Such direct instruction models and levelled reading groups initially show promising gains for students — scores on standardized reading assessments do go up — but these gains are not usually sustained over time, nor do they eliminate achievement gaps. These types of literacy approaches are also subject to being criticized for consequences beyond the realm of short-term test score gains. Not only can the relationship between policy-makers and test makers be called into question

(Meyer, 2005) — these curricula and tests represent large expenditures for school districts and potentially large profits for materials developers — but the negative impact of such programs on student and teacher engagement as well as on higher-order thinking are documented (see Altwerger, 2005). Debate about the appropriateness of different approaches to literacy is sometimes characterized as “whole language versus phonics,” but Delpit (1995) argues that this dichotomy is false. Instead, she advocates a classroom approach “to provide for students who do not already possess them the additional codes of power” (p. 40). There is likewise an emphasis among some reformers on numeracy curriculum, another topic of heated debate. Schoenfeld (2004) documents “the math wars,” explaining how advocates for traditional universal mathematical standards fought reformers advocating a mathematical process orientation. Schoenfeld advocates a middle ground, highlighting where traditionalists and reformists agree, namely that the status quo ill serves young people, that instruction and curriculum could be improved, and that (echoing Darling-Hammond) “no students should be denied a fair chance to learn mathematics because they have been assigned unqualified mathematics teachers” (p. 282).

Bridging this section (curriculum) and the next section (structures) is the policy of streaming (or tracking) students, particularly in high school. Oakes (1985) has documented the pernicious effects of the tracking system, demonstrating the ways that poor and minority students are systematically provided with inferior educational opportunities and fewer postsecondary options because only certain courses and not others are offered to them. The policy implication suggests “detracking”; that is, to provide high-quality instruction and a variety of postsecondary options to all students.

Lucas (1999) warns that this is more easily said than done and warns against a policy of “detracking,” preferring that high schools institute a substantively differentiated curriculum. Lucas argues that not only is it “far easier to remove a set of labels than it is to maintain vigilant and effective oversight over a perpetual process of curriculum allocation and student instruction” (p. 146), but removing tracking labels without changing the kind of education that different students receive is a more effective tool for stratification — the very objective detracking is supposed to resist.

### ***Structures of Schools***

Teddle, Stringfield, and Reynolds (2000) conclude that “the context variable that has been studied the most [in school effectiveness research] is the socioeconomic status of the student bodies that attend schools. The SES makeup of a school has a substantial effect upon student outcomes beyond the effects associated with students’ individual ability and social class” (p. 184). Although not exactly a school “structure,” one implied policy recommendation regarding poverty and schooling would focus on creating incentives that result in fewer schools having student bodies that are largely high poverty. Lee and Burkham (2002) argue for just such a policy, although from a different starting point. (Their research indicates that students who are poor are much more likely to attend schools of low quality.) “Across a wide and diverse array of school quality measures, social background is consistently linked to the quality of schools children attend. We support a more equitable distribution of children across public schools” (pp. 84-85).

Other policy recommendations focus on “the organization of teachers’ work lives” (Lee with Smith, 2001) because “the work teachers do — instruction — is influenced by the conditions within which they perform their tasks” (p. 81). In high schools where teachers have high levels of “collective responsibility,” encouraged in part by reforms that provide time and resources to develop teacher professional learning communities, gaps between low- and high-SES students were found to be significantly smaller than in high schools where there was little sense of shared responsibility among teachers. In some ways this research echoes the Effective Schools research, with its emphasis on high expectations. The emphasis on shared or communal expectations — “attitude as an organizational property,” as the authors call it — is distinct, however. The findings also “are consistent with research that demonstrates that cooperative, collegial, and communal school environments have strong effects on student engagement and teacher commitment” (p. 100). A sense of collective efficacy among teachers includes a sense of optimism and high morale, but is not limited to those aspects of school culture. Shared expectations bring together teachers’ knowledge, skills, and personal history in ways that have a positive influence on academic programming as well as on the sense of community in schools.

Some research suggests that when students feel a sense of community in school, they achieve more. In a study of 24 elementary schools, Battistich et al. (1995) found that “the strongest positive effects of school community occurred among schools with the most disadvantaged populations” (p. 627), supporting the hypothesis that “a caring, supportive, and responsive community would be particularly important in schools with poor student populations” (p. 649). These authors argue that, especially for

schools serving low-SES students, “students who feel themselves to be part of a caring school community develop a strong attachment to that community and consequently become motivated to abide by its norms and values” (p. 650). The implications of this type of argument — that a sense of community can be a tool to acculturate students to new and more mainstream values — is examined in more detail in later sections of this review.

### ***School–Community Connections***

At the heart of the notion of collective efficacy is a sense of common purpose. Frequently the concept is defined or limited to teachers’ and administrators’ sense of common purpose. But there are other researchers and advocates who argue that school–community partnerships, when shaped as collaborations around common interests and purposes, can bridge gaps between schools and communities and make schools better and more humane places to work and study (see, for example, Rigsby, Reynolds, & Wang, 1995).

Attempts to move beyond mere rhetorical support of parental involvement to actual policies and practices is fraught with challenges. Epstein (1995) has called this the “rhetoric rut.” Who, after all, would be against parents and communities working together? Very few, in the abstract. Where difficulty arises is moving from generic interest to concrete policies and practices that make real connections between schools and homes.

Dehli (1996), in a study of Ontario parents and education activists, points to another problem in generic parental-involvement policy talk, namely that, “‘parents’ do

not comprise a coherent and unified constituency within educational politics. The specific and varied histories of struggles over school programs and governance in Ontario, and the different articulations of ‘choice’ within that history, further illustrate that parents are positioned differently in relation to schooling” (p. 85). If parents are not a monolithic group, if they have varied interests and seek different things from schools, how best should schools make connections outside the school walls?

True collaborations with racially, economically, and linguistically diverse communities are rare (McCaleb, 1997). The work of Annette Lareau (2003; Lareau and Shumar, 1996) has provided the most serious and sustained set of warnings and caveats about school–community connections. Class differences between schools, which are essentially middle class institutions, and working class or poor families are rarely acknowledged by schools or policy-makers, Lareau argues, to the detriment of effective policy-making. The abstract to one article (Lareau and Shumar, 1996) puts it this way:

Although the authors recognize that family-school policies have garnered considerable enthusiasm and support, they have serious reservations about these policies. In this article, they criticize the literature for its failure to come to grips with observable differences in parents’ and guardians’ educational skills, occupational and economic flexibility, social networks, and positions of power that they bring to home-school encounters (p. 24).

Policies relating to schools and the families they serve are also often rooted in tacit middle class expectations that essentially devalue working class parents while saddling them with unrealistic expectations, according to this analysis. A question raised by other researchers about how and why some parents are engaged with the school while others are not (Barton et al., 2004) has contributed to a deeper understanding of incentives and roadblocks to parental participation.

## **Part II: Examining the Inequality–Deficit Tension: How Important Are Attitudes?**

Shorthand explanations, whether used consciously or not, describe how and why a prosperous nation allows poverty to persist, years after public declarations regarding the elimination of child poverty. Some explanations are structural (the changing nature of the economy, for example), whereas others are cultural or personal (such as, people are poor because they don't have good work habits). These default explanations for poverty have deep historical roots. In the United States, from the Settlement House era to the Great Depression to the War on Poverty (Katz, 1993 & 1995), both social reformers and defenders of the status quo relied on stereotypical images of the deserving and the undeserving poor (the difference between bad luck and bad behaviour) to shape public policy and practice. When public resources are limited — as they always are — the division between the deserving and undeserving serves to organize decisions regarding who gets what resources and under what conditions, and whether it is institutions or people that most need to change.

Historian Michael Katz (1995) uses the phrase “improving poor people” to characterize the mandate Americans place on public schools:

As a strategy, improving poor people consistently has awarded education a starring role. Of all options, education has shone as the preferred solution for social problems by compensating for inadequate parenting, shaping values and attitudes, molding character, and imparting useful skills. Added to its other assignments, improving poor people has given American education an extraordinary — indeed, impossible — load, which is one reason why with regularity since the third quarter of the nineteenth century critics have alleged the failure of public schools. As the history of education shows, improving poor people not only has misdiagnosed the issues; it also time and again has deflected attention from their structural origins and from the difficult and uncomfortable responses they require. (p. 4)

I use this quotation from Katz to introduce one prevalent line of argument in the contemporary literature on poverty and schooling — that schools have to “fix” poor kids — and to point out that this line of thinking is not new. Framing the issues in a way that emphasizes what children affected by poverty lack rather than what they possess is a frame that leaves the default comparative category (the middle class) unarticulated. It is also a frame that relies upon cultural explanations for poverty and for its impact on schooling.

Part I of this literature review began by describing the central importance of the Coleman report. If there is a work of comparable influence to introduce this section it would be the work of Oscar Lewis (1968/1969). Lewis’s “culture of poverty” thesis argued that poverty is a “subculture with its own structure and rationale, a way of life that is passed down from generation to generation along family lines” (p. 187). Lewis’s work has been influential; in particular, his ideas are used to argue that poverty has more to do with people’s “culture” than with structural economic or societal causes. According to Lewis, the culture of poverty is characterized by similarities in “family structure, interpersonal relations, time orientation, value systems, and spending patterns” (p.187).

### ***Ruby Payne: Marketing the “Culture of Poverty” Explanation***

The most recent and influential manifestation of the culture of poverty thesis in schooling is the work of Ruby Payne (1996), who states in the introduction to her bestselling book that “I came to realize there were major differences between generational poverty and middle class — and that the biggest differences were not

about money” (p. 9). Payne’s work is not scholarly and relies on a “scant research base” (Keller, 2006) but its popularity in American school districts has recently made it the focus of academic analysis and critique (Osei-Kofi, 2005; Gorski, 2006). Like Lewis, Payne emphasizes that families affected by poverty have particular cultural habits that distinguish them from middle class families. Payne argues that teachers need to understand these “hidden rules among classes” in order to more effectively teach “middle class norms.” Some of the hidden rules that Payne identifies echo Lewis’s categories directly. For example, she identifies family structure (“tends to be matriarchal”), interpersonal relations (“social inclusion of people they like”), time orientation (“present most important. Decisions made for the moment based on feelings or survival”), and spending patterns (money “to be used, spent”) (p. 59) along with many other “hidden rules.” Payne’s book also emphasizes how the culture of poverty causes many “cognitive deficiencies” that teachers must equip themselves to address. (To support this assertion, Payne notes in an appendix that she is drawing on some of the large statistical research studies mentioned in the first section of this literature review.)

An exploration of why Payne’s work is so popular among teachers, principals, and superintendents in the United States is beyond the scope of this review. It is worth noting, however, that her approach comes with books, workshops, and other “support materials” — in other words, she markets a full curriculum about poverty and schools — that efficiently breaks down the topic of poverty and schooling into easy-to-read lists and suggestions. For example, in one article (2003), Payne lists 13 behaviours “related to poverty” in one column and explains their connection to poverty. In the adjoining column, she lists 13 concrete interventions. For example, Payne lists the problem

“Cannot follow directions” and explains its connection to poverty by saying “Little procedural memory used in poverty. Sequence is not used or valued.” The intervention she recommends is “Write steps on the board. Have them write at the top of the paper the steps needed to finish the task. Have them practice procedural self-talk.” For the problem “Constantly talks” Payne explains that “poverty is very participatory” and recommends that teachers “make students write all questions and responses on a note card two days a week. Tell students they get five comments a day. Build participatory activities into the lesson” (p. 2). That following directions and talking in class are issues in classrooms in high-poverty schools seems obvious, if mostly because these are issues that arise in all classrooms and schools. The leap Payne makes to explaining these classroom issues as having their roots in the home lives of poor children — and only poor children — signals that her work uses a deficit framework to explain academic inequality”.

### ***Recognizing Difference, Identifying Inequality, Articulating Deficits***

There is general agreement in the literature on poverty and schooling that schools are mainstream or middle class institutions. “The schools capitalize upon the entering advantage of Canadian-born middle-class students not from some conscious and malicious conspiracy, but simply from a privileged, class ethnocentrism. Our schools are operated by middle-class school boards, administrators and teachers” (Forcese, 1997, p. 127). So in one sense at least, the work of Ruby Payne makes a useful contribution to the literature of poverty and schooling: she acknowledges that schools have a particular class orientation and that families might have a different one, implying

that teachers, to be effective, have to see and straddle that distance. There are nevertheless several problems with Payne’s articulation of difference. Some of the problems relate to the conclusions she draws about children living in poverty — is she describing accurately what students who experience poverty are in fact like? Is the lack of compatibility between home life and school life so stark? Another problem that is often not addressed in the literature of poverty and schooling is: If in fact families and schools are so different, who should most be expected to change?

Policies and practices that seek to address or compensate for inequalities must confront what Martha Minow (1990) calls “the dilemma of difference.”

You have the power to label others “different” and to treat them differently on that basis. Even if you mean only to help others, not hurt them, because of their difference, you may realize the dilemma. By taking another’s difference into account — in a world that has made difference matter — you may recreate and reestablish both the difference and its negative implications. Any remedy for discrimination that departs from neutrality seems a new discrimination and risks a new source of stigma (p. 374).

Not acknowledging the ways that children affected by poverty are different from their more privileged peers will not make those differences go away, but attempts to recognize these differences inevitably run the risk of attaching negative labels (and expectations) to all children who fall into a certain socioeconomic category. The dilemma that faces educators is how to envision policies and practices that might be more sensitive to and effective with students experiencing poverty without characterizing those same students (or their families) one-dimensionally, solely as victims to be rescued, people with pathologies to be cured or, in the words of Katz, people to be “improved.”

Other authors have argued that policies that require students to be labelled are inherently destined to fail because they begin with a framework that sees students as essentially inadequate. For example, Haberman (1995) describes the power of labelling this way:

Blaming the victim is an active pastime of schools and educators. It is an occupational disease. In former times we used terms such as culturally deprived, socially deprived, culturally disadvantaged, academically disadvantaged, underdeveloped, disaffected, difficult to serve, hard to reach, alienated, and a host of others. All of these terms, including the present “at risk,” are labels used for the same purpose: to attribute the causes of low achievement and school failure to the child and the family, but to do so in a manner that implies the labeler is not prejudiced and is sincerely trying to help. There is no way to provide a hopeful or an equal education to a child that one perceives as basically inadequate. (p. 51)

The alternative that Haberman proposes is that instead of labelling students, teachers take action inside classrooms to support individual students; Haberman’s conclusions are similar to those of the Effective Schools advocates described in an earlier section of the paper.

### **“At Risk”**

John Portelli and colleagues have recently conducted an extensive SSHRC-funded review of literature of “conceptions of students at risk” (see Portelli et al., 2006a; 2006b). They identify “five key conceptions of students at risk that can be found in the recent literature, government documents and independent educational research organizations. Reflecting a range of relative degrees, these five conceptions include the deficit, descriptive, liberal, educational, and critical discourses” (2006b, p. 1).

Portelli and colleagues identify the “deficit discourse” as “dominant,” a finding consistent with this review of the literature on poverty and schooling. They also note that “at risk” is most commonly defined according to social and economic preconditions that exist *outside* the school, implying that the “problem” of underachievement in school is attached to what communities and families and children do, not to what adults inside schools do. Portelli and colleagues (2006b) do pose a couple of useful questions, namely, “What can we legitimately ask of schools? How can we do so without blaming schools which are doing their best with limited resources and increased demands for accountability and constraints?” (p.1).

### ***Policy Recommendations to Address Deficit Frameworks***

Deficit frameworks, wherein students, families, and communities are described by educators according to what they lack, are more than just socially discourteous. Deficit frameworks not only describe the distance between school and community but also serve to maintain that distance, by defining what happens in schools as always good and what happens in communities as always bad. Because deficit explanations come from a variety of sources — from the individual dispositions of educators and from institutional practices — policies to address deficit frameworks should be targeted at different levels simultaneously. In the following paragraphs, a few examples of policy recommendations are briefly described.

At the individual level, policies that emphasize the importance of the dispositions of educators seem warranted. When educators at school sites learn with one another about a community’s assets as well as its difficulties, when what takes place outside the

walls of the school is no longer seen as universally negative, work in schools perhaps improves. Noguera (1996) and Pollock (2004) describe neighbourhood visits as one attempt to educate teachers, almost all of whom live far from the communities in which they teach, about the neighbourhood lives of their students. That these trips are sometimes viewed as anthropological exercises that confirm rather than refute stereotypes, and that occasionally insult both teachers' and communities' knowledge, shows that some attempts to educate educators about school communities can backfire if not handled delicately.

Instead of focusing on teacher professional development, Haberman has focused on teacher recruitment and selection. The Haberman interview protocols for “star teachers” of students in poverty identify prospective teachers' dispositions. His model is based on the conviction that the professional skills teachers need to be effective can be built and developed over time, but that such skills in the absence of a positive disposition towards students and families living in poverty will not be enough. Through the use of scenarios (“What would you do in this situation?”) and the training of principals and others who interview teacher applicants, Haberman has emphasized that what teachers think about the communities they serve, and how they articulate their own responsibilities to learners who come from poor families, are the most important predictors of success in the classroom.

Noguera (2003) has argued that school policies that invest in the social capital of parents could have a positive impact not only on school–community relations but also on communities themselves. Kugler and Flessa (forthcoming) have noted that the rhetoric of parent involvement built into many school policies is seldom accompanied by

sufficient resources or, importantly, by any discussion of whether or how to measure what counts as community involvement. All three authors would argue that policy discussions about the purposes of schooling should be expanded to include a vision of community connection. Although some might argue that community involvement has moved to the back burner in the current “accountability” environment, others might argue that the question of “accountability to whom and for what” is worth posing anew.

## **Conclusion**

What story does this literature review tell about the relationship between poverty and schooling? The ways that we shape policy and practice responses will depend at least in part on the “policy narrative” (Roe, 1994; also see Grubb, 2006a) we construct to simplify and explain a complicated and vast web of interrelated causes, correlations, and effects. There are two significant components to include in any policy narrative developed from this literature review. First, a focus on either/or problems and either/or solutions is not just incomplete but also harmful. The weight of the literature is unambiguous in its major findings, from both the macro and micro level. From the macro level: The results of schooling are determined in large part by preconditions over which schools have no control, like family SES. From the micro level: Some schools do far better than others in resisting this deterministic relationship, through a combination of curricular and human resource investments. To talk about one aspect of the relationship between poverty and schooling without at the same time talking about the other contributes to two false ideas: on the one hand, that schools can do nothing, and on the other hand that schools can do everything. The challenge, therefore, is to tell a consistent story about the importance of school initiatives in the context of other mutually supportive social policies. (See Mahon, 2001 for description and critique of gaps in current social policies for children. See Neysmith, Bezanson, and O’Connell, 2005 for a description of how families suffer when these social policies are abruptly changed.) Davies (1995) puts it succinctly when he criticizes the either/or way in which policy-makers often discuss the relationship between poverty and schooling: “Children and their families do not experience their lives in neatly compartmentalized ways, but

the policies that support educational and human services at all levels reinforce fragmentation and reduce the chances that children and their families will get the help they need” (p. 267). The work to create the conditions that support greater educational opportunities for children affected by poverty falls not only to schools but also to policy-makers who, along with families and communities, have significant responsibilities in this comprehensive, shared endeavour.

Another succinct conclusion of this review of the literature on poverty and schooling is that viewing children living in poverty through deficit frameworks shapes policy and practice. These frameworks must consistently be identified and rebutted, because they make it impossible to envision education as a collective endeavour. Schools and communities have necessarily different roles in rearing and educating children. But when these roles are considered complementary and not adversarial schools function better. And in order for the roles to be considered complementary, communities cannot be persistently and repeatedly described by educators only in terms of what they lack and how they fail. When educators articulate a more comprehensive vision of what it means to work with communities in poverty, we accomplish something significant: we take a stand against the sometimes overwhelming public discourse that blames poor people for their poverty and that excuses unacceptable levels of educational inequality.

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