

## Making Sense of Poverty: Considerations for Our Work

By Duane Brothers

For educational leaders, defining poverty is a tricky but important business. Whether understood explicitly or implicitly, what we think of poverty informs what we believe to be causes of poverty which in turn determines a myriad of policy and political and administrative decisions, or lack thereof (Curwood, 2009). While often equated with the lack of basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, and shelter ("Poverty," 1995), Townsend (1993) expands the definition of poverty to a lack of skills and attributes or *personal capabilities* (Sen, 1999), to access the resources and amenities that are typically available to members of the greater society.

### ***What constitutes and accounts for poverty?***

Arguments can be made that poverty is caused by either moral, social, and economic failures at the individual or local community level, or by larger structural dynamics including governmental policy and imperatives of the global market economy that are well out of the control of individual actors. For educational leaders, these diverse starting points lead to dramatically different work: do we help individual students fit into the existing systems, or do we also have a further responsibility to tackle structural impediments that may exist in our schools systems and beyond?

West (1993a), Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) and Silver (2000) maintain that most of us view poverty through one of two broad paradigms or *shared narratives* (Postman, 1996). The first narrative through which many view poverty is what West (1993a) calls the "conservative behaviorist camp" (p. 11). Within this broad narrative, the behavioral impediments of individuals and groups are deemed to be responsible for individual or collective lack of social and economic progress (Levitas, 2003; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; West, 1993a) or put another way, a "focus on the waning of the Protestant ethic – hard work, deferred gratification, frugality and responsibility" (West, 1993a, p. 11).

Reflecting upon the impoverished conditions in which many Canadian Aboriginal people find themselves, Flanagan (2000) contends that government largess has resulted in a population that lacks motivation and independence due to "government programs proliferating luxuriantly in their communities" (p. 179). Within this discourse, incorporating the poor into the workforce in and of itself mitigates the effects of poverty and defines success. Helpful measures include job training regimens and improving the participation rates of people in the economy. From this perspective, poverty is to be decreased by limiting governmental and non-governmental forms of income support that are thought to "destroy initiative, independence, and respect" (Levitas, 1998, p. 14).

Assumptions inherent within these perspectives can be problematic for a number of reasons. A number of researchers bring attention to statistics indicating the growing number of working poor (Anyon, 2005; DeGroot-Maggetti, 2002; *Income Trends*, 2009; Lu et al., 2003; US Poverty & Wealth, 2011). A singular focus on paid work ignores the value of unpaid work and caring responsibilities and also obscures gender, race, and other inequalities in the labor market (Mitchell & Shillington, 2002). As well, job training efforts all too often focus on entry level positions in retail and service industries that are, by nature, low paying and in no way prepare people to participate in other aspects of society.

Implicitly ignored from this perspective are problems arising from a growing income gap in Canada and other countries between those who have and those who do not. Reflecting the neo-liberalist mentality pervasive in western democracies during the past 30 years, a "meritocratic social mobility" (Levitas, 1998, p.3) has been championed, or as Margaret Thatcher famously stated "we believe that everyone has the right to be unequal" (1975, p. 1). It is assumed we simply need to assist, or force, those less fortunate to join what are essentially unproblematic economic and political systems. Such a view reflects a total ignorance of persistent economic and social inequalities that impact disadvantaged groups including women, people of color, and Aboriginal people.

Lamenting the high correlation between African-American heritage and poverty, West (1993a) argues that when historic oppression and discrimination is ignored, "crucial and indispensable themes of self-help and personal responsibility are wrenched out of historical context and contemporary circumstances - as if it is a matter of personal will" (p. 14). His argument translates well in Manitoba when we consider the inordinate high rates of poverty within our Aboriginal communities (Carter & Polevychok, 2009; Levin & Riffel, 2000; "Population Winnipeg," 2010; Silver, 2000).

The second of the dominant narratives West (1993a) calls "liberal structuralist" (p. 11). Within this discourse, political and economic structural restraints, historic political and economic policies and practices including racism, job discrimination, inadequate health care, and poor education are responsible for impoverishment today. Poverty and social exclusion cannot be understood outside of coming to terms with the market economy, governmental policy over time, and historic and contemporary racism, sexism, and classism.

Silver (2000) identifies a number of structural policy changes that have arguably increased the amount of poverty in Canada, and have been directly linked to massive job losses and downward pressure on wage levels, especially for relatively unskilled. During the past 30 years, supports for the poor including housing, training, transportation, and child care have been replaced by a strategy to eliminate welfare dependency by pushing welfare recipients into low paying or "quasi labor markets of subsidized employment and training placements" (Graefe, 2006). During the 1980's, federal contributions to provincial social spending decreased by \$150 billion (Silver, 1992); transfers to provinces decreased by 7 billion less between 1996 and 1998; and since 1995, Manitoba has reduced benefit rates, shelter allowances, and raised eligibility requirements for assistance programs (Silver, 2000). After further clawbacks which have reduced universal social supports to poor people and their children, Myles (1998) concludes that the reemergence of poverty is only to be expected and Esping-Anderson (1999) states that much of the recent employment growth has been in unstable and relatively poor jobs.

### ***The consequences for our children***

It is within this context that dire conditions exist for many of the children and families that we serve. It is not only the lack of resources, but the lack of any reasonable hope to attain the attributes and capabilities to attain the resources that make poverty and social exclusion especially pernicious (DeGroot-Maggetti, 2002; Laidlaw Foundation website, 2002; Levitas, 2003; Mitchell & Shillington, 2002; Sen, 1992). The consequences of poverty are reflected in the inability of individuals to fully participate, not only in the larger economy but in all social, and political aspects of a democratic society. They are reflected by children in our schools who do not participate in sports programs due to embarrassment of the clothes they wear. They are reflected in the inability of parents living in poverty to effectively advocate for their children, *or even feel they can come to the school*. They are reflected in a belief that *closing the gap*, and getting more students to graduate, *on its own*, will remedy poverty.

From this perspective, success would be a significant improvement in the relative living standards of those who are currently poor as well as an assurance that people have the *capabilities* (Freire, 1970; Noddings, 1993; Sen, 1992) to think, consider, advocate, and act (Mitchell & Shillington, 2002). *This is precisely where we as educational leaders can make a difference.*

### ***What we can do***

For inclusion to occur, the harmful effects of discrimination in all its forms - based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender - need to be continually considered and addressed. We need not only to connect with students but also with their families and communities in deliberate acts to be *present* (Senge, 2004) in their lives. This requires deliberate work to stop, see, and get to know the people that we serve and the lives that they live. Work needs to be done to assist all people to fully participate in society to discuss, dialogue, advocate, and defend for themselves rather than having ourselves as well-meaning people do it for them.

After all, personal agency matters. Contemporary people and communities are not static and homogeneous and we can ignore at our peril the strategies of resistance that impoverished peoples often use, prime examples being a focus upon athletics and music rather than academics in African-American youth culture as a way to claim personal value and empowerment (Noguera, 2003) or the emergence of *gangsta rap* and gang culture in local Aboriginal communities. Simply placing additional resources into the hands of impoverished peoples, e.g., more computers in schools, does not necessarily eliminate problems. A tendency to believe that singular structural remedies will work is limited at best, and counterproductive at its worst.

Frankly, I have often found myself implicitly and explicitly acting upon perspectives that would be at home in both the conservative-behaviorist and the liberal-structuralist camps. I have lamented the sad reality of ugly bigotry that has manifested in my own family history and have seen “savage inequalities,” to use Kozol’s phrase (1992). I have also at times found myself saying, especially about young Black and Aboriginal men, “damn it, why don’t those people dress properly, pull their pants up, stop talkin’ fool talk, and get a damn job”! I certainly heard the same sense of questioning when I talked to school superintendents about their understandings of and experiences with poverty (Brothers, 2010).

It is with much reflection that I now consider that no singular discourse can accurately capture all of the causes of poverty and social exclusion; rather, one needs to be conscious of the multi-dimensionality of the individual actors, systems, and processes which in turn informs the varied policy and action responses that we make in our schools. First, we can agree that “schools can’t do everything but we can do something” (Levin, 2008). This requires that we bring our minds, eyes, and most importantly, our hearts, as we attend to the lives of the students and communities we serve (Bates, 2006; Dillard, 1999; Larson & Murtadha, 2004). Second, we are to recognize that culture is structural and “is rooted in institutions such as families, schools, churches, synagogues, mosques and communication industries” (West, 1993a, p. 13). We must soberly acknowledge that our school systems are not neutral, objective institutions and that we must question the ways in which practices, for which we are responsible, disadvantage some and privilege others.

Finally, we must come to terms with the tremendous despair that is present in persistently depressed communities that exist, whether we acknowledge or not, in every school division in Manitoba. Multiple generations of oppression, poor education and poverty have resulted in a subculture of deep malaise, self-loathing, and hopelessness in which violence, the sexual degradation of women, substance abuse are obvious characteristics.

Tremendous work continues to be done in many school divisions throughout Manitoba and beyond to mitigate the destructive ramifications of poverty and social exclusion. Presence (Senge, 1999), the mindful attention to each of the children in our care, is a beginning. A relentless focus upon quality teaching, upon developing the capabilities to question, think, persist, and be mindful of our circumstances while also, yes, becoming full of joy, wonder, and expression are another all capabilities to be illuminated.

Finally, a growing literature is telling us that transformational educational leaders do what many of us, including myself, have long considered to be *new work*, not *our work*. We may consider that to truly address the needs of all towards a truly inclusive and just society, we may ask of ourselves to develop the attitudes and aptitudes to forge new connections and develop new social and political networks with community groups, players in other branches of government and become the “critical organic catalysts” (West, 1993b, p. 22) for progressive development that we are meant to be.

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