Equity

Developing competencies,
changing trajectories

Summary

- Although Canada is a top-ranked nation in education equity and income mobility, intergenerational cycles of inequity remain a problem in this country.

- The public education system is one of the best places to address this problem.

- In order to be successful in school and beyond, students need competencies in creativity, social-emotional learning, citizenship, and health.

- When children enter school, there is a "competency gap" between students from high- and low-socio-economic status backgrounds in a number of these areas

- Because competencies in creativity, social-emotional learning, citizenship, and health are not articulated as key goals in our education system, nor embedded beyond rhetoric in curriculum, they are often not seen as concretely teachable and learnable.

- Teaching and learning these competencies in school can improve long-term outcomes for all students.

suc·cess (n.):

We want great things for our children. We want them to be happy, healthy, economically secure and civically engaged. When we talk about long-term success, we are referring to a cluster of measures that represents social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and economic well-being. These can include things like employment rates, graduation and enrollment numbers, voter turnout, and physical or mental health statistics.

eq·ui·ty (n.):

Students have different

needs based on what they have experienced in their lives. For many, these differences can be described through socio-economic status, or SES. This cocktail of indicators encompasses the social and economic power that an individual has relative to others in society, and is often defined by measurements like parental education, family income, and occupation.

However, SES is not the only barrier that students may face. Some students face barriers to success due to their identity; be it their sexual orientation, their race, their religion, or any other aspect of who they are.

All students need opportunities to develop the skills, competencies, and dispositions that will help them succeed in the world.

Breaking the cycle

Certain populations in Canada face more challenges than others, both economically and socially. And these challenges can persist across generations. As of 2006, one third of Canadian children born to high-income parents will become high-income earners themselves, while a third of those born in poverty will remain in poverty as adults (p. 1, Corak, 2006).

Other systemic barriers, including those based on race and ethnicity, gender, ability, religion, parental education, and newcomer status, compound these challenges.
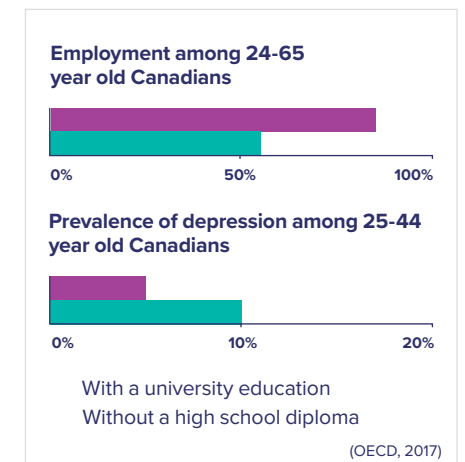
In 2003, the high school dropout rate for youth from the lowest family-income quartile was over three times higher than those from the highest quartile (Zeman, 2008). And many people, including individuals who identify as Indigenous, whose parents have no post-secondary education, who are from rural communities, or who are from single-parent households, are underrepresented in Canadian universities (McMullen, 2011). Overall, socio-economic status (SES) is one of the strongest predictors of learning outcomes (Hattie, 2009).

While there is more income mobility and educational equity in Canada than in other countries (p. 40, Corak, 2006; p. 207, OECD, 2016), there is still a need for improvement.

How can we make sure that every child in Canada has an equal chance at success in life? This is a challenging problem, but given that 94% of students in Canada attend publicly funded schools (Frenette & Chan, 2015), public education should be a central part of any solution.

Education influences life success

Education is an important tool in the social change toolbox. In Canada and internationally, individuals with more education are more likely to be employed, earn more money, are less likely to suffer from depression (OECD, 2017), and are physically healthier (National Center for Health Statistics, 2012). If we can support more students to stay in school, graduate, and access post-secondary education, we may be able to interrupt the intergenerational cycle of inequity.

Employment among 24-65 year old Canadians

0%   50%   100%

Prevalence of depression among 25-44 year old Canadians

0%   10%   20%

With a university education
Without a high school diploma

(OECD, 2017)

Gaps at school entry

There is a well-established body of research identifying language, memory, and other academic skill gaps, as well as neurological differences, between children from high- and low-SES backgrounds at school entry (e.g. Buckingham, Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013; Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2015; Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2009).

A 2007 Canadian study echoed these findings. Janus and Duku, using the Early Development Instrument (EDI), found an alarming gap among Canadian children in their to meet age-appropriate developmental expectations. The researchers found that low-SES was correlated with poor performance on the EDI, which includes physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge.

Although some students are already disadvantaged at school entry, this does not seal their fate. All of these gaps can be closed. The competencies are teachable and learnable, and even the structure of an individual's brain can change in response to the right environment (Johnson, Riis & Noble, 2016).

Competencies for school success

There is some debate about whether competencies in social-emotional learning, citizenship, health, or creativity can regularly predict academic achievement, but it is clear that they are correlated with long-term schooling outcomes.

One study of students from the US, UK, and Canada found that social-emotional indicators in grade one were not necessarily significant predictors of reading and math scores in grade four (Duncan et al., 2007). However, other studies have found that students' social-emotional and creativity competencies at school entry were strong predictors of success up to 16 years later. In fact, these competencies had a stronger relationship to student outcomes at the age of 22 than their grade one marks (Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson, 2005, p. 1467).

In Hattie's *Visible Learning,* factors such as metacognitive strategies, creativity programs, motivation, self-concept, and cooperative learning (all of which include references to the competencies in creativity, social-emotional learning, citizenship, and health) have significant predictive effects on student learning outcomes (Hattie, 2009).

Changing trajectories by shifting focus

The Middle Years Development

Instrument (MDI) measures competencies such as social and emotional development among grades 4 and 7 students through a self-report questionnaire.

In a longitudinal study of 8000 British Columbia students, the EDI measure of social competence at kindergarten was predictive of peer relations in the MDI at grade 4, and the EDI measure of emotional maturity was predictive of subjective well-being in the MDI (Guhn, Gadermann, Almas, Schonert-Reichl, & Hertzman, 2016).

This indicates that the trends identified at school entry hold over time, and without an explicit, system-wide focus on teaching and learning these competencies, it doesn't appear likely that the gaps shown by Janus and Duku (2007) will close as students move through school.

Students need to be provided with intentional opportunities to learn and and grow in the areas of creativity, social-emotional learning, citizenship, and health.

Low expectations: A self-fulfilling prophesy

Teaching and learning competencies will not solve all equity issues. The way that teachers take up the competencies is directly connected to their potential to change outcomes for students. Over three decades of research indicates that teachers' expectations - both low and high - can influence the way that students perform (Jussim & Harber, 2005).

For example, in Canada, British Columbia's Auditor General (2015) pointed to the effects of low expectations in relation to Indigenous student performance. In order for teachers to support all students' learning, they must reflect on their stance in the world and their biases (both conscious and unconscious).

Focusing on competencies in health, creativity, citizenship, and social-emotional learning, and addressing systemic barriers, may be one of the most direct routes to ensuring that all students can grow up to live happy, healthy, economically secure, civically engaged lives.

The EDI

The Early Development Instrument (EDI), created by Dan Offord and Magda-lena Janus from McMaster University, provides a glimpse into how students use these competencies at school-entry. The EDI is a 103-item questionnaire completed by kindergarten teachers that measures children's demonstrated ability in five domains:

- **Physical health and well-being**
- **Social competence**
- **Emotional maturity**
- **Language and cognitive development**
- **Communication skills and general knowledge**

The EDI has been used to collect data on over 1.1 million Canadian children, as well as children in 32 other countries. The five domains assessed in the EDI correspond closely with competencies in creativity, social-emotional learning, citizenship, and health.

The MDI

The Middle Years Development Instrument, developed by Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichlin, in partnership with the Human Early Learning Partnership at University of British Columbia and the United Way of the Lower Mainland, is a self-report measure completed by students in grade 4 and grade 7.

It asks them how they think and feel about their experiences both inside and outside of school, and addresses five areas linked to health, well-being and academic achievement, including:

- **Physical health and well-being**
- **Connectedness**
- **Social and emotional development**
- **School experiences**
- **Use of after-school time**

Measuring What Matters

Across the world, educators, policy-makers, and experts agree that success in both school and life will take more than literacy and numeracy skills and academic content knowledge. Students need opportunities to develop skills, knowledge, and habits in social-emotional development, creativity, democratic citizenship, and health.

In alignment with this global shift, People for Education proposes that:

- **the development of competencies in creativity, citizenship, health, and social-emotional learning is as essential as traditional areas of academic achievement.**

- **the school environment itself – the opportunities and conditions that support these areas of learning – plays an essential role in ensuring students' overall success.**

Since 2013, we have been working with partners from universities, foundations, and government, as well as education stakeholders from across Canada, to understand how to define, support, assess, and embed these broader competencies into teaching and learning in our publicly funded education system.

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